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**‘On a shiny night’: The Representation
of the English Poacher, c.1830-1920**

Stephen John Ridgwell

PhD

University of Sussex

April 2017

Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

University of Sussex

Stephen John Ridgwell, PhD

'On a Shiny Night': The Representation of the English Poacher c.1830-1920

Summary

This thesis examines the representation of the English poacher from around the time of the reform to the Game Laws in 1831 to the ending of the First World War. Although a considerable body of work exists on nineteenth-century poaching, its representational aspects have yet to be fully explored. Moreover, existing studies have had little to say on poaching in the early years of the twentieth century. Set against the backdrop of the Edwardian Land Question the poacher, or more properly the idea of him, carried a far greater resonance than has been allowed for. Drawing on a wide range of literary and visual material, the work in hand offers a number of fresh perspectives on a significant figure in English culture and society.

Chapter One considers the evolution of poacher representations from c.1830 to the next round of Game Law reform in 1880. The poacher of these years was largely defined by what he was against and made victim of. By the end of this period, however, representations of the poacher were clearly starting to show more positive aspects. The next two chapters focus on the years between 1880 and 1900. Chapter Two provides context by examining the growingly heated politics of the land-game nexus and the reasons for poaching's recorded decline. Chapter Three considers the implications of these developments by looking more specifically towards poacher representations. Here we see how the poacher was viewed increasingly in terms of what he did, and the skills and values he embodied, as much as for the laws he opposed. Chapter Four takes us through to the end of our period – a time when the shooting and preservation of game reached their historic peaks and when debates about the land were at also their height.

Focused on the production and consumption of ideas and images relating to the poacher, the central argument to be made is that during these years of profound social and economic change two clearly discernible developments occurred. First, the poacher came to occupy a more prominent place in English culture than hitherto had been the case; and second, he came to be represented in a number of more positive ways even as he remained on the wrong side of the law. This broadening representational palette served a surprising number of emotional and ideological needs and is suggestive of two further points. One, that the politics of the Game Laws - and thus of the poacher - carried greater importance than has previously been understood. And two, that existing accounts of ruralism's role in shaping ideas of national identity in late-Victorian and Edwardian England have if anything been underplayed.

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Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to Sussex University who have managed things very efficiently since 2013. During this time I have had the benefit of excellent supervision from Professor Matthew Cragoe and Professor Claire Langhmer. To the latter I owe a special debt. Indeed, I am not altogether sure that I would have reached this point without her help. Thank you.

In a world that is increasingly virtual, it is pleasing to record that real people in actual archives, museums and libraries still matter enormously. Along the way I have been assisted by the staffs of the Bishopsgate Institute, the British Library, Cardiff University Library (Special Collections), Cambridge University Library, the London Library, Manchester Central Library, the Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading, the National Archives, the Norwich Millennium Library, the Norfolk Record Office and the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Stratford. Special thanks to John at the British Library who determinedly tracked down the first edition of the *Lincolnshire Poacher* (see Appendix 4). My sincere thanks also to Professors Alun Howkins, John Martin and Peter Stead for advice, references and critical comments. Also to Professor Antony Taylor for permission to use the cartoon by ‘Cynicus’ (see Chapter Two). My friend and expert on the arcane world of Anglo-Saxon land charters, Dr Ben Snook, has been an invaluable source of encouragement and consolation. I still don’t know anything about land charters though.

Finally, but most importantly, I need to thank my wife, Candy. It is no exaggeration to say that this work would not exist without her unfailing love and support. As the *Shooting Times* put it in 1907, ‘A keen woman may be of the greatest use to a poacher.’

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Abbreviations

AGLL	Anti-Game Law League
BB	Bodleian Ballads
BL	British Library
BPP	British Parliamentary Papers
CPS	Commons Preservation Society
DNB	Dictionary of National Biography
ELRL	English Land Reform League
FSS	Folk Song Society
HO	Home Office
LCP	Lord Chamberlain's Papers
LNS	Land Nationalisation Society
MERL	Museum of English Rural Life
NFPS	National Footpath Preservation Society
NRO	Norfolk Record Office
NRU	National Reform Union
NSPPS	Norfolk and Suffolk Poaching Prevention Society
PC	Pearson Collection
USC	United Services College

Introduction

[P]oaching has always been a great English fact, and whether the delinquent has been a William Shakespeare or a Bill Stokes, the justice of the peace has always had enough to do with poachers.¹

Gamekeepers and poachers are seldom seen in public. Hence ordinary folk form their own mental images of each, and in doing so rely on impressions gained through tradition or fiction rather than on facts of life.²

Poaching, that quintessential - and somewhat romanticised - country activity, also raises complex issues of interpretation.³

Overview

For many people in England today their first encounter with a poacher is likely to have come through Roald Dahl's *Danny Champion of the World*. First published in 1975, the book has run to many editions and also been made into a successful film.⁴ Throughout the story, Danny's poaching father is presented in terms that emphasise both his physical (and implicitly moral) attractiveness. In a trope commonly used for more positive representations of the poacher, the man whom Danny adores has 'brilliant blue eyes' for which aside from spotting game he employs when smiling in a way that is impossible to fake.⁵ Early on in the book Dahl makes a striking defence of the poacher's life. Faced with the charge that poaching is simply stealing, Danny's father declares:

You've missed the point, Danny boy! You've missed the whole point! Poaching is such a fabulous and exciting sport ... just imagine for a minute that you are all alone up there in the dark wood, and the wood is full of keepers hiding behind the trees and the keepers have guns. You could go to prison, my father said. There was a glint and sparkle in his eyes that I had never seen before.

Furthermore, Danny is told,

this phony pheasant-shooting business ... is practised only by the rich. Only the very rich can afford to rear pheasants just for the fun of shooting them down when they grow up.⁶

¹ *Literary Gazette*, 10th September 1859, 254.

² *The Times*, 8th July 1961.

³ Anne Digby, 'The Local State' in E.J.T. Collins (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1850-1914*, vol. vii, pt. ii (Cambridge, 2000), 1454.

⁴ Roald Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World* (London, 1985, first publ. 1975). The film version (1989) was directed by Gavin Millar and starred Jeremy Irons as Danny's father.

⁵ Dahl, *Danny*, 13-14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-3.

An important reason for studying history from the perspective of cultural formation and consumption is that ‘representations have consequences’.⁷ We should remind ourselves here that Dahl (born in 1916) was a hugely successful author whose writings have shaped the imaginative lives of a great many people. In his explorations of ‘unofficial knowledge’, Raphael Samuel was keen to stress how a ‘ballad, a song, a novel or a poem’ - a ‘fact’ or a myth - are as much historical documents as a ‘cartulary or a pipe roll’.⁸ Almost forty years after Danny’s first appearance, one of the current generation of English nature and landscape writers, the Cambridge educated Patrick Barkham, revealed the following in his 2013 journey into ‘the twilight world’ of *Badgerlands*:

Searching for badgers, and the world they inhabited, was my own idiosyncratic attempt to escape the strictures of suburbia and rediscover a state of being where I could be absorbed by the rush of the wind and the sway of the trees and the scent of the earth. The thick round copse on the brow of the hill ... was just as I had imagined the wood in Danny Champion of the World, the sort of place where poachers go in search of pheasants.⁹

We later learn from Barkham that ‘poaching is romanticised because it was - and still is - a small way in which the rural poor got one over the men who owned the land.’¹⁰

Although, as the preceding examples make clear, representations of the poacher continue to have currency, the core elements to these were already well established. Of itself Dahl’s work is unique, but his version of the poacher was not entirely of his own making. The work that follows, therefore, is not a conventional history of poaching. What has been termed the ‘second oldest profession’ already has its historians.¹¹ Rather, it is a history of how a set of ideas and perceptions to do with poaching, and the poacher, came together at a particular moment in time to produce what has remained an enduringly stable, and largely positive, set of representations. If much of the world that we recognise today was moulded in the ninety years covered by this study - as agriculture gave way to industry and new patterns of urban living evolved - the same can equally be said for what we have come to know of the poacher.

⁷ Rohan McWilliam, ‘Melodrama and the Historians’, *Radical History Review*, 78 (2000), 74.

⁸ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 2012, first publ. 1996), 15.

⁹ Patrick Barkham, *Badgerlands* (London, 2013), 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹ Charles Chenevix Trench, *The Poacher and the Squire: A History of Poaching and Game Preservation in England* (London, 1967), 9.

To be sure, the poacher's cultural presence long predates our own point of departure. The legends to do with Robin Hood, the 'exemplar for all poachers and their numerous well-wishers', form part of a rich tradition of medieval outlaws in which tales of their roaming the woods and poaching can be found.¹² For instance, in his panoramic *English Social History* (1944), the great historian and populariser, G.M. Trevelyan, dwelt lovingly on 'a poacher's account of dawn in the woods' from the anonymously written fourteenth-century poem *The Parlement of the Three Ages*.¹³ While the practice was obviously much older, the term 'poacher' itself dates from around 1610 by which time a confusing set of Game Laws had evolved out of the pre-existing Forest Laws. Probably the best known of the various stories attaching to Shakespeare's early life in Stratford is that he poached on the Charlecote estate of Sir Thomas Lucy. According to one report, Shakespeare was 'much given to all unluckiness in stealing venison and rabbits' and the persecution he suffered at Lucy's hands 'at last made him fly his native country'.¹⁴

Much more important than whether or not this episode ever occurred is the enduring belief that it did. As one of the numerous accounts to mark the tercentenary of his birth in 1564 put it, 'Shakespeare is said to have lent a hand in carrying off a head of deer. Detection followed – the man was prosecuted and the poet made.'¹⁵ Both in the act itself, and its mediation through subsequent cultural production and transmission, poaching can therefore be doubly representational. It is also polysemic in the range of meanings that it can be made to bear. In the case of Shakespeare, we have poaching as either a manly rite of passage - complete with attractive Merrie England setting - or as a consciously subversive act against a widely contested legal code, or even as both. As with Robin Hood's colourful exploits in the merry greenwood, in which the outlaw could be 'transmuted into the sylvan reveller of urban wish fulfilment', the idea of Shakespeare's poaching would have important implications for later representations of the poacher where modern forms of communication allowed 'old stories' to be updated

¹² Roger Manning, *Hunters and Poachers: A Social and Cultural History of Unlawful Hunting in England, 1485-1640* (Oxford, 1993), 62-63; Gillian Spraggs, *Outlaws and Highwaymen. The Cult of the Robber in England from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2001), 24.

¹³ G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London, 1944), 24-25.

¹⁴ Rev. Richard Davies, quoted in S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford, 1970), 109. Davies was writing sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. He died in 1708.

¹⁵ H. Fitzcook, *All About Shakespeare* (London, 1864), no page numbers.

and circulated to an ever-widening audience.¹⁶ Within this ‘theatre of memory’ the humble Bill Stokes could readily occupy the same stage as England’s greatest writer.

Alongside the work of Roger Manning on the social and cultural significance of poaching in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, other scholars have covered the years between the revised Game Law system of 1671 and the reforms of 1831.¹⁷ Throughout this time the twinned subjects of Game Laws and poaching figure frequently in the representational record. Here we might look to the writings of John Clare. Faced with the ‘new spatial morality’ created by the process of enclosure, the Northamptonshire poet combined his interest in popular song with the Robin Hood legends to produce ‘The Poachers’.¹⁸ Drawing heavily on the popular ballad, ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’ (or its Northamptonshire equivalent), the poem concluded with a call to

Come prime your Guns your belts throw on / Thro the forest softly tread / The sun is set and the day is gone / & all our foes are fled / ... / We hide by day & roam by night / Yet know not how to fear / & a shining night is our delight / At the season of the year / & we have freedom in our cause.¹⁹

Although like much of Clare’s work not published in his lifetime, the poem is important in revealing the extent to which the idea of the poacher had penetrated into popular consciousness and of how common cultural interchanges could shape further representations. Like Shakespeare (and indeed a youthful Dahl), Clare may well have done some poaching himself, but his ‘real’ knowledge of the act came from other sources.²⁰

In terms of actual practice we have come to know a great deal about the English poacher. From the medieval to the modern we know about what was taken and how it was disposed of. We know about the individual poacher and poaching gangs (both

¹⁶ Peter Stallybrass, ‘Drunk with the cup of liberty’: Robin Hood, the carnivalesque, and the rhetoric of violence in early modern England’, *Semiotica*, 54 (1985), 129.

¹⁷ Manning, *Hunters*; Donna Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831* (Basingstoke, 2001); Julia Patton, *The English Village: A Literary Study, 1750-1850* (NY, 1919).

¹⁸ Matthew Cragoe and Briony McDonagh, ‘Parliamentary enclosure, vermin and the cultural life of English parishes, 1750-1850’, *Continuity and Change*, 28 (2013), 36-37.

¹⁹ John Clare, ‘The Poachers’ in P.M.S. Dawson, Eric Robinson and David Powell (eds), *John Clare: A Champion for the Poor. Political Verse and Prose* (Ashington, 2000), 120-21.

²⁰ Johnathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (London, 2004), ch. 3.

overwhelmingly male).²¹ We also know of causes and motives and where and when poaching was most common. Above all, perhaps, we know that for a great many people who never poached themselves it was not seen as a crime in the usual sense of perpetrator and victim – in fact quite the opposite. Important here is the unusual place that poaching occupies in the English legal system. Though criminalised for centuries and subject to increased levels of preservation, in the words of Halsbury ‘The law of England does not admit a right of absolute property in game’.²² In other words, game can be taken unlawfully, but it cannot actually be stolen. It was partly through this ‘curious anomaly’, observes Douglas Hay, that many who were usually prepared to support ‘the defence of property and the conviction of thieves’ took a different view when it came to the poacher.²³

Commonly seen as upholding a wasteful and socially exclusive pastime, objection to the laws surrounding game has been broadly spread and historically consistent. Writing on crime and punishment in eighteenth-century England, Frank McLynn argues how general dislike for the Game Laws was capable of promoting a ‘certain fluidity in class relations’.²⁴ What McLynn suggests for the eighteenth century was certainly the case for the succeeding two as politics developed a national platform and leading men of the day such as John Bright, Joseph Chamberlain and David Lloyd George publicly engaged with Game Law politics.²⁵ Moreover, the greater preservation of game brought a steady rise in gamekeepers. With the image of confrontation forming a ‘key element in the iconography of what has become the “access issue”’, the keeper’s growingly visible presence impacted significantly upon the representation of his chief antagonist.²⁶ In the conflicts attached to what might be termed the land-game nexus, where bullying

²¹ Though see the recent article by Harvey Osborne. ““Unwomanly practices”: Poaching, Crime, Gender and the Female Offender in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Rural History*, 27 (2016), 149-68.

²² Earl of Halsbury, *The Laws of England* vol. xv (London, 1911), 211. And see Appendix 1.

²³ Douglas Hay, ‘Poaching and the Game Laws on Cannock Chase’ in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John Rule, E.P. Thompson, Cal Winslow, *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1977), 212.

²⁴ Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1989), 203.

²⁵ On the development of ‘platform politics’ see Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), chs. 2-3.

²⁶ Graham Cox, Charles Watkins and Michael Winter, ‘Game Management and Access to the Countryside’ in Charles Watkins (ed.), *Rights of Way: Policy, Culture and Management* (London, 1996), 197.

keepers were routinely cast as an unwelcome adjunct to an excessively privatised landscape, poaching was often regarded as a legitimate action.²⁷

Across the period we are considering, representations of the poacher have been closely related to the politics attaching to game and its preservation. It is no coincidence that these became increasingly more positive in the decades following the Great Reform Act when issues to do with greater enfranchisement and plurality, not to say access to the land, were central to various reformist platforms. This chronology coincides exactly with an unprecedented growth in the scale and intensity of game preserving, which in part was encouraged by the enclosures of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.²⁸ In other words, to study the representation of the English poacher in the years between 1830 and 1920 is to enter the discursively rich world of the Land Question. Coming to its peak in the latter half of our period, this many-sided question often drew attention to the physical, financial and legal resources given over to the preservation of game.²⁹ Thus, if poaching was about the age-old question of who owned the game, it was also about who owned the land upon which it was found – a question of profound emotional as well as practical importance to a rapidly expanding population. With the shooting of game a recurring source of controversy within long-running debates over access, poaching has often been sited on the fault-line between the narrow rights of landowners and the conflicting imperatives of wider usage.³⁰ Becoming part of what James Vernon has termed ‘the language of the land’, the ‘tyrannical’ Game Laws also featured in the rhetoric of both urban and agrarian radicalism where the bonds between town and country were frequently emphasised.³¹

²⁷ Richard Hoyle, ‘Field sports as history’ in Hoyle (ed.), *Our Hunting Fathers: Field Sports in England after 1850* (Lancaster, 2007), 12.

²⁸ Tom Williamson and Liz Bellamy, *Property and Landscape: A Social History of Land Ownership and the English Countryside* (London, 1987), ch. 10.

²⁹ Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (eds), ‘Introduction’ to *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950* (Basingstoke, 2010). See also Alun Howkins, ‘From Diggers to Dongas: The Land in English Radicalism, 1649-2000’, *History Workshop Journal*, 54 (2002), 1-23.

³⁰ Graham Cox, “‘Shooting a Line’? Field Sports and Access Struggles in Britain’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, (1993), 268.

³¹ James Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993), ch. 8.

Over the course of our period life in England steadily became more urban than rural-centred.³² However, we should be careful not to overstate the spatial or emotional distance between the two worlds. Arguing for the need to think more in terms of an ‘urban-rural continuum’, P.J. Waller notes how from 1850 to 1914 ‘Country still influenced town in direct as well as subtle ways’, while poaching constituted ‘a thriving rural-urban occupation’.³³ Also of course there was the cultural dimension. As a recent study of A.E. Housman suggests, ‘statistical facts do not ... accurately reflect how people feel’ and for much of the population going into the twentieth century the countryside was ‘the true locus of “Englishness.”’³⁴ By the fiftieth anniversary of *The Shropshire Lad*’s first appearance in 1896, the book had gone through forty-eight editions. Within such a milieu, and going beyond simple nostalgia, not only does the enduring demand for cultural forms and activities which focused on the countryside become more explicable, it also contextualises ‘the attendant symbol of the poacher’ and the ‘rights and freedoms’ he was taken to symbolise.³⁵ The radically-minded Victorian poacher, James Hawker, gave Charles Bradlaugh the highest possible praise when he wrote of his hero that ‘He was not a Poacher of game but a poacher on the Privileges of the rich Class’ [sic].³⁶ But in poaching, or at least the idea of it, there is a more elemental freedom too. Patrick Barkham’s far from singular desire to escape the ‘strictures’ of daily life and find the ‘scent of the earth’ has been equally important in the making of the English poacher. If views on the countryside have often been shaped by the competing notions of ‘use’ and ‘delight’, the poacher has come to represent both.³⁷

Poaching, then, is about more than simply acquiring fresh meat, it is an act loaded with ideological and cultural meaning. In her literary study of the ‘invented’ countryside, a work deliberately framed by major dates in the legislative history of the Game Laws

³² Between 1831 and 1911 the population for England and Wales grew from just under 14 million to just over 36 million. Over the same period the urban population grew from c.44% to c.79%. C.M. Law, ‘The Growth of Urban Population in England Wales, 1801-1911’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), 125-43.

³³ P.J. Waller, *Town, City and Nation: England 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1983), 185, 195.

³⁴ Peter Parker, *Housman Country: Into the Heart of England* (London, 2016), 18, 169.

³⁵ Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the question of class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1994), 163.

³⁶ James Hawker (ed. Garth Christian), *James Hawker’s Journal: A Victorian Poacher* (Oxford, 1961), 23.

³⁷ T.C. Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600* (Edinburgh, 2000), 7.

(1671 and 1831), Donna Landry records how the poacher has long been viewed as the 'demotic double' to his apparent superiors in the hunting field, operating as a powerful signifier of established hierarchies challenged and of liberty asserted.³⁸ Similarly, in their consideration of 'The Charnwood Opera' (c.1750) as an act of performed resistance to enclosure and the Game Laws, Gerald Porter and Jukka Tiisanen see the poacher as 'an oppositional version of the primary activities of "official" culture'.³⁹ However, the expression of popular liberty contained within poaching can also cut the other way. According to his biographer, Dahl considered himself to be a 'Tory anarchist', whilst Clare's politics can be read as a form of conservative radicalism.⁴⁰ George Gleig's 'The Poacher' (1834) portrays a man with a fierce belief in his rights to take game but who was 'no Jacobin; quite the reverse.'⁴¹ Gleig himself was a close friend of the Duke of Wellington. 'Poaching has a long counter-cultural history', observes Frederick Burwick, but it has not necessarily served counter-cultural ends.⁴²

When considered as a form of 'rough cultural practice', in which social and spatial barriers are transgressed, both the taking of game, and the manner in which it is recorded, can hold strong performative elements.⁴³ The numerous ballads on poaching were open to both private reading and public performance and display. In more practical terms 'blacking' is suggestive here, as are reports of poachers adopting various other disguises or using the courtroom to show defiance or sly humour in the face of their accusers.⁴⁴ The point is further made by Bob and Brian Tovey's recent account of their poaching lives. For the cover image of *The Last English Poachers* (2015) father and son adopt suitably provocative poses. Exuding an air of amused knowingness, the septuagenarian Bob is dressed in a subversively ramshackle version of sportsman's apparel, including a postman's sack and a Chinese communist hat. In pictorial terms there appears to be no question that these are uncompromising men, as eager to poach for what it displays about themselves as for any material gains that might be accrued.

³⁸ Landry, *Invention*, 81.

³⁹ Gerald Porter and Jukka Tiisanen, 'Performing Resistance to the New Rural Order: An Unpublished Ballad Opera and the Green Song', *The Eighteenth Century*, 47 (2006), 221.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Treglown, *Roald Dahl* (London, 1995), 7-8.

⁴¹ George Gleig, *The Country Curate* (London, 1834), 30.

⁴² Frederick Burwick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015), 215.

⁴³ Richard Price, *British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change* (Cambridge, 1999), 319.

⁴⁴ Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks, "'Wee be black as Hell": Ritual, Disguise and Rebellion', *Rural History*, 4 (1993), 41-53; Eleanor Eden (ed.), *The Autobiography of a Working Man* (London, 1862), 31.

As Tovey senior puts it: 'there's the love of it ... It's a man alone in hostile territory [it's] doing what's in your nature to do since the dawn of time.'⁴⁵ Or is this simply what poachers long acculturated into poaching lore are supposed to say?

The practice and representation of the poacher therefore generate a number of issues relating to constructions of masculinity and to notions of transgression. Opening her study on poaching in medieval England, Barbara Hanawalt claims how 'Poaching is a game – a dangerous titillating game of hide and seek that has changed little over time'.⁴⁶ For other scholars, much of the poaching done in England between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries was a 'symbolic substitute for war', or for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a means of 'reinforcing male gender identity.'⁴⁷ Though possibly originating as a protest against a local act of enclosure, the poaching ballad *Thornemoor Woods* [see Appendix 5] also conceives the action to be a 'game' played by 'lads'.⁴⁸ With physical effort and field craft increasingly less of a requirement in legal hunting, poaching could also be viewed as a more authentic and manly expression of the sporting instinct. Within the basic rules of the game which had developed by the end of the nineteenth century, and which in essence have remained unchanged, a 'good' poacher will be physically and mentally active, closely tied to the land, and given to working alone, or in pairs, and aided by a faithful dog. His antithesis tends to be idle, if latently violent, not of the land, and often (though not always) part of a town-based gang. Above all else, the good poacher is a 'sportsman', the bad poacher is not.

Adapting a phrase used by Judith Walkowitz, albeit in a very different context, it has long been possible to see poaching as a 'quintessential act of transgression'.⁴⁹ As the 'low/Other' inversion of legally sanctioned hunting it cannot perhaps be otherwise. In this way poaching is often presented less as a form of taking that which does not belong (aided by the fact that of itself game is *res nullius*) than as a kind of ritualised breaking of bounds in which the 'low' temporarily crosses into the realm of the 'high'. Landry's

⁴⁵ Bob and Brian Tovey, *The Last English Poachers*, (London, 2015), 46-7.

⁴⁶ Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Men's games, king's deer: poaching in medieval England', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 18 (1988), 175.

⁴⁷ Manning, *Hunters and Poachers*, 3; Michael Freeman, 'Plebs or Predators? Deer-Stealing in Whichwood Forest, Oxfordshire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Social History*, 21 (1996), 7.

⁴⁸ 'Thornemoor Woods' in Steve Roud and Julia Bishop (eds), *The New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (London, 2012), 350-52.

⁴⁹ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992), 3.

view of the poacher as ‘demotic double’ is useful here. Forming part of a ‘generalised economy of transgression’ the inverted world of the ‘carnavalesque’, with its symbols of opposition and reversal (black for white, night over day), becomes another way of situating representations of the poacher.⁵⁰ ‘Carnavalesque discourse’, notes Peter Stallybrass, ‘permeates’ the earliest ballads of the poaching Robin Hood.⁵¹ If forest and woodland spaces are traditionally linked with notions of outlawry and inversion, so too is the night – historically a time that lessened the reach and force of institutional power and so ‘revolutionised the social landscape.’⁵² Although in statistical terms poaching was largely done by day, in cultural terms the poacher is more commonly taken to be a nocturnal presence. As Jack Palmer / Dick Turpin declares in Harrison Ainsworth’s defining account of the highwayman, *Rookwood*, ‘The finest of all boys ... are those birds of the night, and minions of the moon, whom we call, most unjustly, poachers’.⁵³

Taking as its focus the production and consumption of ideas and images relating to the poacher, the following explores how representations of this archetypally (though not necessarily) rustic figure were formed and subsequently embedded in the English imagination between the 1830s and the ending of the First World War. During the years covered by this work, demographically, economically and politically the rural world steadily gave way to the urban. At the same time, however, the new media technologies developed to serve the needs of a mass industrial society drew extensively on an emergent ‘other’ countryside based on what people ‘thought or felt about rural England’ as much, if not more, than what they actually knew of it.⁵⁴ In framing the question ‘why not, in discussing rural life, go straight to the reality’, Stuart Lang helpfully draws our attention to the powerful representational forces in play.⁵⁵ We are also reminded that the representation can itself come to form the ‘reality’.

Crucially here, this transformation in the power and reach of communications, and thus representations, did not just extend to a greatly expanded print culture. The period also

⁵⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986), 2-20; Howkins and Merricks, ‘Wee be’, 41-2.

⁵¹ Stallybrass, ‘Drunk with the cup’, 115.

⁵² A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day’s Close: A History of Night-time* (London, 2006), 227.

⁵³ W. Harrison Ainsworth, *Rookwood: A Romance* (London, 1834), 219-220.

⁵⁴ Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London, 2002), 2.

⁵⁵ Stuart Lang, ‘Images of the rural in popular culture, 1750-1990’ in Brian Short (ed.), *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis* (Cambridge, 1992), 133.

witnessed the growth of an ‘intensified commercial visual economy’ evident in the emergence of new media technologies and the formation of new audiences.⁵⁶ As new modes of representation and reception were established, it was not only possible to hear and read of the poacher, it was possible to ‘see’ him too. While remaining an everyday presence in the rural world, it was to be in this culturally constructed ‘other’ countryside - which itself was thought to contain the ‘essential England’ - that the poacher would truly make his mark.⁵⁷ Although the argument for an intrinsic connection between ruralism and evolving notions of ‘Englishness’ has not gone unchallenged, an understanding of how extensively representations of the poacher were formed and played out in a host of different contexts would seem to provide evidence to the contrary.

Far from ‘English urbanites’ half-heartedly sustaining ‘a folk myth of the rural home, the return to the land’, deepening interest in figures like the poacher suggests the extent to which a sense of ‘the rural’ came to shape English thought, feeling.⁵⁸ While acknowledging that much of this version of Englishness was ‘mediated through metropolitan ideals’, a study of the poacher carries ruralist culture beyond its commonly ascribed southern heartlands into what David Matless regards as a more geographically heterogeneous landscape of Englishness.⁵⁹ We shall of course be encountering many South Country poachers, but western, eastern and northern variants will present themselves too. Although some areas might be more given to poaching than others, in both actual and representational terms the poacher was a national figure. The next part of this introduction further develops our discussion of the ways in which the poacher has come to be regarded by historians and the wider public. By establishing in general outline what the poacher has come to mean historically, we shall be better placed to examine his representational development within our own given historical moment. The final section outlines approaches to be taken and offers a brief synopsis of the chapters that follow.

⁵⁶ Andrea Korda, *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London* (Basingstoke, 2015), 7.

⁵⁷ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge, 2003), 211.

⁵⁸ Peter Mandler, ‘Against “Englishness”: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vii (1997), 160.

⁵⁹ David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell, ‘Introduction’ to *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880-1940* (New Haven, 2002), xi; David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), 17-18.

The Poacher in History and Memory

Good luck to every gentleman who lives in Lincolnshire / Good luck to every poacher
that goes to set a snare / Bad luck to every gamekeeper who will not sell his deer / For
it's my delight on a shiny night in the season of the year.⁶⁰

So concludes 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'. Much collected and performed since its first appearance in the late-eighteenth century, it was included by Alan Titchmarsh in his 2009 'miscellany' of 'everything an Englishman should know'.⁶¹ The ballad can also be read in Kenneth Baker's *Faber Book of English History in Verse* (1988). Introducing the latter volume the then Conservative Secretary of State for Education emphasised that 'It is important for people living today to understand how they came to be what they are ... to recognise how our rich and complex past has shaped what we think of as our national identity.'⁶² 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' has not only come to have the status of a 'national' song, but as part of a broader process of representation and cultural exchange it has done much to define how the poacher and his actions are popularly conceived of [see Appendix 4]. The nation's favourite gardener 'learning' about poaching as a child from the words of a song, duly performing it and effectively re-performing it on the pages of a book half a century later, offers a further demonstration of the cultural looping which produces, and reproduces, images of the poacher.

Needless to say, the kind of poaching represented here is not wholly typical of reality. Recalling a life spent in rural Sussex, Gilbert Sargent (born 1889) was adamant that 'You can forget all that "My delight on a shining night" stuff'.⁶³ For the poachers of Sargent's acquaintance, a moonless night was much to be preferred. Also of course many poachers have been far from youthful apprentices roaming the countryside for the 'delight' of it. Commercially motivated poachers in well-organised gangs have been a persistent feature of poaching's past (and present). Work by James Sharpe on crime in early modern England, and by Peter Munsche on the years between 1671 and 1831, has strongly emphasised this aspect of poaching and the potential rewards that it could

⁶⁰ Robert Bell (ed.), *Ancient Poems, Ballads and Songs of the Peasantry of England* (London, 1857), 216-17. Bell notes how Northamptonshire, Leicestershire and Somerset also have claim to this 'very old ditty', but that the oldest known printed version (c.1776) reads Lincolnshire.

⁶¹ Alan Titchmarsh, *England Our England* (London, 2009). Quotation from publisher's details on Amazon, visited 19th January 2015. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/England-Our-Alan-Titchmarsh>.

⁶² Kenneth Baker (ed.), *The Faber Book of English History in Verse* (London, 1988), xxi-ii.

⁶³ Gilbert Sargent, *A Sussex Life. The Memories of Gilbert Sargent, Countryman* (London, 1989), 77.

bring.⁶⁴ ‘Crime or not’, argues the latter, ‘poaching was a trade’ that increasingly ‘occupied large numbers of men and was capable of yielding large rewards.’⁶⁵

It is important to reiterate that both on the ground, and at the level of representation, poaching was a national phenomenon. Turning to the later nineteenth century, a number of studies have focused on the financially driven rural-urban poaching centred on the Midlands and the industrial north which, for a time at least, saw significantly more prosecutions than in the southern and eastern counties more commonly associated with the crime.⁶⁶ If providing industrial communities with a welcome form of unsanctioned recreation, scholars have convincingly shown the hard-edged criminality behind much of this activity. For John Archer, whose earlier work on poaching in East Anglia considers it in the light of ‘social crime’ (see below), ‘An Understanding of northern poaching can lead us far from the quiet of the game covers’ and into a world of ‘gangs and the criminal classes’.⁶⁷ Whatever these gangs lacked in guile and skill, they made up for in number and readiness to employ force. If there is evidence to suggest that these gangs might occasionally have enjoyed some support, on the whole they seem to have been generally out of favour. This is not to say, however, that dramatic accounts of the latest poaching affray, which often involved startling levels of physical violence, did not also serve as a rich source of entertainment in the pages of the popular weekly press or through the roughly printed sheets of broadside ballads.

Allowing for such qualifications, at the level of ‘social memory’ where ‘stories of poaching and bitter stories of the harshness of treatment are still part of the oral tradition’, the poacher has more often than not been regarded with sympathy.⁶⁸ The staging in 2012 of the ‘Bonny Moor Hen’, an ambitious community drama that

⁶⁴ James Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750* (London, 1999), 179-88; Peter Munsche, *Gentlemen and Poachers: The English Game Laws, 1671-1831* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 3.

⁶⁵ Munsche, *Gentlemen*, 64-66.

⁶⁶ Harvey Osborne, ‘The Preservation and Poaching of Salmon in Victorian England; Fresh Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Poaching Crime’ (PhD thesis, Lancaster, 2000), 170. And see John E. Archer, ‘Poaching Gangs and Violence: The Urban-Rural Divide in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 39 (1999), 25-38; Idem, “‘A Reckless Spirit of Enterprise’: Game-Preserving and Poaching in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire’ in David W. Howell and Kenneth O. Morgan (eds), *Crime Protest and Police in Modern British Society: Essays in Memory of David Jones* (Cardiff, 1999), 149-75; Harvey Osborne and Michael Winstanley, ‘Rural and Urban Poaching in Victorian England’, *Rural History* 17 (2006), 187-212.

⁶⁷ Archer, ‘Reckless Spirit’, 150.

⁶⁸ Ronald Fletcher (ed.), *The Biography of a Victorian Village* (London, 1977), 56. On ‘social memory’ see Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013).

recreated the 1818 Battle of Stanhope between the grouse-poaching lead miners of Weardale and the keepers of the Prince Bishop of Durham, is typical of this outlook.⁶⁹ For professional historians also, the point generally seems to hold true. In his pioneering article on Victorian poachers, David Jones noted how ‘one is often struck by their intelligence, confidence and humour’, whilst Harry Hopkins’ valuable, if overly polemical account, sees poachers as waging an honourable ‘war of the maquis’ against the entrenched forces of landed privilege.⁷⁰ Researching rural society and the Anglican clergy in nineteenth-century Norfolk, Robert Lee has found poaching to be ‘a paradigm for much wider social and political issues’ with the local poacher often playing a leading role in the defence of common rights.⁷¹ Even historians of the landed gentry have considered the activity in a broadly sympathetic light and found poachers to be among ‘the braver and more independent village men’.⁷²

Here we arrive at an understanding of poaching that has been the centre of much scholarly attention. Starting with the Hammonds and *The Village Labourer* (1911), historians have often set the poacher’s actions in the wider context of struggle against the loss of customary rights and the imposition of class law. Christopher Hill’s final book, *Liberty Against the Law*, sees poachers as retaining ‘something of the Robin Hood spirit’ and poaching as a form of continued resistance to ‘the defeat of freedom by property and its laws.’⁷³ Poaching, in other words, has become a key example of ‘social crime’. First posited by Eric Hobsbawm in 1972, it can be defined as existing when ‘popular notions of legality and legitimacy’ are at odds with the official view and when ‘acts of law-breaking contain clear elements of social protest, or when such acts are firmly connected to the development of social and political unrest.’⁷⁴ Regarding the latter point, Hobsbawm and George Rudé’s earlier study of Captain Swing saw

⁶⁹ Julie Ward, Helen Francis Mills, Alan Anderson, ‘Drama in the Dale: Transformation Through Community Drama’, *Harvard Educational Review*, 83 (2013), 54-61. ‘The Bonny Moorhen’ is a well-known local ballad commemorating the battle. See John Wilson, *Memories of a Labour Leader* (London, 1910), 56. In 2014 a version of the song was recorded by Martin and Eliza Carthy for their album *The Moral of the Elephant*.

⁷⁰ D.J.V. Jones, ‘The Poacher: A Study in Victorian Crime and Protest’, *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), 845; Harry Hopkins, *The Long Affray: The Poaching Wars in Britain* (London, 2008, first publ. 1985), 6.

⁷¹ Robert Lee, *Rural Society and the Anglican Clergy, 1815-1914: Encountering and Managing the Poor* (Woodbridge, 2006), 126-27.

⁷² F.M.L. Thompson, ‘Landowners and the rural community’ in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Unquiet Countryside* (London, 1989), 83.

⁷³ Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (London, 1997), 98, 105.

⁷⁴ Summary from Sharpe, *Crime*, 122.

increased levels of poaching as a useful ‘index of the rising social tensions’, and poachers themselves as important actors in the ensuing events.⁷⁵ Focusing on the eighteenth century, the complementary works by Douglas Hay on the poachers of Cannock Chase, and by E.P Thompson on the Waltham Blacks, also found poaching to be a significant expression of community resistance.⁷⁶ Here the poaching gang became the articulation of a defensive collective identity, an attempt to uphold the established moral economy. Work on so-called ‘grudge poaching’ in late-Tudor and early-Stuart Kent over disputed wood supplies has made similar points, whilst Imw Harvey has argued that it was in the wake of the 1389 Game Law, which prohibited the hunting of ‘gentlemen’s game’ to those with lands worth less than forty shillings, that poaching ‘began to take on the possibility of a strong political colouring’.⁷⁷

However, following the Hammonds’ influential work on the ‘village labourer’, the key moment of alignment between the poacher and theories of social crime and protest falls between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period marked by large-scale land enclosure and the attempted curtailment of various customary practices.⁷⁸ Yet if increasingly circumscribed at official level, acts like wood gathering and gleaning continued to be performed as a ‘right’. Although a criminal act for centuries, the taking of game was likewise accepted by many as a legitimate pursuit. Combining powerfully with these ‘secular notions of custom’ and ‘proper order’ was the reading of certain lines of scripture.⁷⁹ If gleaning was justifiable by The Book of Ruth, the key text for poaching was Genesis, where according to God’s word

The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air ... into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you.⁸⁰

The degree to which these ideas had come to influence public perceptions by the early nineteenth century can be seen in George Crabbe’s ‘Smugglers and Poachers’ in which

⁷⁵ Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing*, (London, 2001, first publ. 1969), 81.

⁷⁶ Hay, ‘Poaching’ in Hay (et al), *Albion’s Fatal Tree*; E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origins of the Black Act* (London, 1975). For a different interpretation of the ‘Blacks’ see Pat Rogers, ‘The Waltham Blacks and the Black Act’, *The Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 465-86.

⁷⁷ Stephen Hipkin and Susan Pittman, “‘A grudge among the people’: Commercial Conflict, Conspiracy, Petitioning and Poaching in Cranbrook, 1594-1606’, *Rural History*, 24 (2013), 101-25; Imw Harvey, ‘Poaching and Sedition in Fifteenth-Century England’ in Ralph Bates (ed.), *Lordship and Learning: Studies in memory of Trevor Aston* (Woodbridge, 2004), 173, 175.

⁷⁸ J.L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer: A Study of the Government of England Before the Reform Bill* (London, 1913, first publ. 1911).

⁷⁹ Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002), 101.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London, 1984), 18.

the clergyman-poet worries how ‘The poacher questions, with perverted mind, / were not the gifts of heaven for all designed?’⁸¹

In spite of the numerous instructional tracts of the period in which the manifold sins of the poacher were laid bare, the attempt to alter the general view that poaching was no ‘moral offence’ remained largely unsuccessful. And by striking so obviously at the jealously guarded privilege of the few, and supported by its historical and mythical lineage, poaching could readily take on the paradigmatic aspect noted by Lee. Focusing on nineteenth-century East Anglia, an area notable for its radical Methodism, Archer sees poaching as the ‘social crime of the countryside’, a view supported by Timothy Shakesheff in his work on crime and protest in Herefordshire.⁸² While emphasising poaching’s seasonality and close relationship to the cottage economy, Alun Howkins also finds strong elements of social crime in the activity.⁸³ Above all, he sees it as an assertion of traditional rights attaching to former areas of common or woodland – the latter being especially important as one of the key imaginative settings for both the outlaw and the poacher.

The tendency to regard poaching as a classic form of social crime has not gone unchallenged. According to Sharpe, the fact that poachers were drawn from a wide social base, and that much of it was done for commercial reasons, makes it ‘difficult to consider poaching as a form of social crime’.⁸⁴ Yet although Sharpe’s first point holds for the medieval and early modern periods, when a great deal of so-called ‘gentlemanly poaching’ occurred, in the time that concerns us poaching was overwhelmingly done by the labouring classes. That said, an important reason for the representational developments we shall be tracing was the mental association made between poaching and various social groupings who for one reason or another disliked recreational shooting and the laws surrounding them, or else took vicarious pleasure in the transgressive and colourful nature of the poacher’s actions. Sharpe’s second point, as

⁸¹ George Crabbe, *Tales of the Hall* (London, 1819), 306.

⁸² John E. Archer, ‘By a Flash and a Scare’: Arson, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870 (London, 2010, first publ. 1990), 165; Timothy Shakesheff, *Rural Conflict, Crime and Protest: Herefordshire, 1800-1860* (Woodbridge, 2003), 156.

⁸³ Alun Howkins ‘Economic Crime and Class Law: Poaching and the Game Laws, 1840-1880’ in Sandra B. Burman and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond (eds), *The Imposition of Law* (NY, 1979), 283; Idem., *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925* (London, 1991), 118.

⁸⁴ Sharpe, *Crime*, 187.

the work on rural-urban poaching suggests, is more persuasive. Moreover, this profit-driven poaching wasn't just confined to the gangs of the Midlands and industrial north. Focusing on the southern counties, David Taylor observes how 'not all poachers were responding to economic privation, let alone fighting a class war against aristocratic privilege' but were simply part of a lucrative trade in game with poulterers and hoteliers.⁸⁵ Even 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', we might note, sells his hare for 'a crown'.

If it is difficult to regard all poachers as 'social criminals', it might still be possible to see the act of poaching itself as conforming to the idea of social crime. In his reformulation of the concept in 1979, John Rule offered two principal categories of crime that might be taken as 'social': those which drew their 'collective legitimation from their explicit protest', and those which 'although against the law were not regarded as criminal by the large numbers who participated in them whether their purpose was to make protest or not.'⁸⁶ From this, Rule concluded, all poaching - whatever its motivations - was 'social crime'. Also allowing for its plainly criminal aspects, Roger Wells has located poaching securely within the 'moral economy of the poor.'⁸⁷ On terms such as these, poaching became a useful 'weapon of the weak' to be deployed in a contested landscape where even hedgerows had a performative function in their delineation of enclosed space.⁸⁸ Indeed, more environmentally-centred scholarship on rural crime and protest sees poaching as part of a broader 'culture of dissent', a form of 'vernacular justice' enacted against perceived encroachments on traditionally enjoyed life-space.⁸⁹

When it comes to poaching, therefore, a broad consensus appears to exist amongst historians of rural crime and protest. Yet as we shall see, the politics of the poacher and

⁸⁵ David Taylor, *Crime, Policing and Punishment in England, 1750-1914* (Basingstoke, 1998), 43.

⁸⁶ John Rule, 'Social Crime in the Rural South in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Southern History*, 1 (1979), 151.

⁸⁷ Roger Wells, 'The Moral Economy of the English Countryside' in Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth (eds), *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (Basingstoke, 2000), 253.

⁸⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985), 41, 265; Nicholas Blomley, 'Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges', *Rural History*, 18 (2007), 1-21.

⁸⁹ Carl J. Griffin, *Protest, Politics and Work in Rural England, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke, 2014), 82-85; Carl J. Griffin and Iain Robertson, 'Moral Ecologies: Conservation in Conflict in Rural England', *History Workshop Journal*, 82 (2016), 27.

his signifying potential go far beyond this particular form of categorisation. If the poacher was a social criminal in the ways already described, he was also a *social* criminal in the degree of interest society took in his actions and in the range and frequency of representations these inspired. If poaching was a crime of the countryside, it wasn't just the countryside that knew of it, or was party to it. Once described by Howard Newby as the 'rural underworld activity *par excellence*', consideration of how and why poaching and the poacher found a significant place in our cultural 'overworld', even as he remained defiantly outside of the law, is of central importance to this current project.⁹⁰

Not surprisingly, most landowners and members of the field sports community have viewed poaching as nothing but the act of unalloyed criminals. From the perspective of the 1850s, Robert Smith Surtees was unequivocal in declaring that 'Poacher is only a mild term for thief', whilst a century later the former editor of the *Field*, James Wentworth Day, claimed how 'The poacher is not a romantic fellow. He is seldom brave, frequently unlikeable, usually unwashed and commonly smells of beer.'⁹¹ 'Tis John Humphreys' Delight to prick the myth of the jolly poacher' declared the same publication's by-line to a 2011 article by the veteran *Shooting Times* columnist.⁹² Yet within this group a crucial - and longstanding - ambiguity is also to be found with men like Wentworth Day and Humphreys contributing to the myths they would otherwise explode. Both have produced popular collections of poaching stories and lore such as the latter's *Poachers' Tales* (1991), 'a variety of colourful yarns of their activities in bygone days'.⁹³

The paradox is partly explained by the long-standing distinction between 'poachers *and* poachers' commonly found amongst the shooting fraternity. For Wentworth Day, a resolutely conservative figure who numbered amongst his hobbies the avoidance of 'Left-Wing intelligentsia',

Seven or eight out of every ten poachers are merely common thieves ... The remaining one or two individuals are usually village sportsman with whom the average sportsman,

⁹⁰ Howard Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* (London, 1987), 39.

⁹¹ J. Wentworth Day, *The Modern Shooter* (London, 1952), 171.

⁹² John Humphreys, 'Night Shift for the Shifty', *Field*, January 2011, 56-59.

⁹³ John Humphreys, *Poacher's Tales* (Newton Abbot, 1991); Idem, *More Tales of the Old Poachers* (Newton Abbot, 1995); J. Wentworth Day, *Rum owd boys: on poachers, wildfowlers, longshore pirates, cut-throat islanders, smugglers and 'fen-tigers'* (Ipswich, 1974).

more fortunately placed than they, will have some sympathy and, not infrequently, a real kinship in outlook and understanding.⁹⁴

Use of the terms ‘old’ and ‘bygone’ are also important in making the appropriate distinctions. Although the evidence suggests that poaching was more likely to be done by men under forty, representations of the poacher (especially from more conservative perspectives) often have him as an older, more colourful character. Wentworth Day’s ‘boyhood hero and companion’, was an old Fenland poacher, Uriah Marshall, who ‘wore a pilot coat of blue melton, bright bass buttons, velvet cords, waterboots, a moleskin waistcoat, and a seaman’s peaked cap.’⁹⁵ In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams showed how repeatedly in the literary construction of the ‘countryside’ various aspects of life taken to exist there are always at a point of disappearance so that ‘Old Englands to which we are confidently referred ... then start to move and recede.’⁹⁶ As suggested through the elegiac titling of the Toveys’ recent book, this tendency has been much in evidence when it comes to representing the poacher.

Inextricably linked to the view that the essential England is to be found in its countryside is the belief that the English are a uniquely sporting people. Sport in this sense meaning the hunting of fur, feather and fin. Writing on the ‘nature of sport’ in his *Book of Good Hunting* (1920), Henry Newbolt echoed many earlier voices: ‘The Englishman is credited with possessing this instinct or desire more commonly than other men’. According to the author best known for his call to ‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’, as ‘a nation we are almost to a man devoted to sport’.⁹⁷ Taking such comments at face value, making what was *ferae naturae* subject to legal sanction if hunted without qualification or permission from the appropriate land-holder was almost bound to create sympathy for the poacher. There was also the issue of enforcement. Predictably perhaps, a process in which most poaching cases were heard in summary courts presided over by one or two magistrates, who might themselves be preservers of game, became a ready symbol of ‘justice’s justice’. While the reality was often different, with many JPs exercising discretion and impartiality in their rulings, the idea

⁹⁴ J. Wentworth Day, *Sporting Adventure* (Harmondsworth, 1943), 192; Idem, *Modern Shooter*, 171. For a recent discussion of Wentworth Day’s work see K.D.M. Snell, *Spirits of Community: English Senses of Belonging and Loss, 1750-2000* (London, 2016), ch. 7.

⁹⁵ Wentworth Day, *Sporting Adventure*, 44.

⁹⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (St. Albans, 1975), 21.

⁹⁷ Henry Newbolt, *The Book of Good Hunting* (London, 1920), 1, 8.

of the poacher as a victim of a deep systemic bias took a firm hold.⁹⁸ And here we come to another source of popular validation for the poacher – belief in the so-called Norman Yoke.

In Christopher's Hill's estimation, the concept was developed in oral and written forms up to its heyday in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The version of the past contained within this narrative was that the invasion of 1066 had violently substituted pre-existing Anglo-Saxon liberties for foreign-bred tyranny. A key example of this repressive new order was provided by the Norman Forest Laws which effectively reserved all hunting rights to the king in any area he chose to designate as 'forest'. The new restrictions on the right to hunt not only ran counter to natural human instinct, they also symbolised the abridgement of personal freedom. Opposing the Forest Laws, or the various Game Laws which flowed from them, was therefore to be on the side of liberty. According to Hill, belief in the Norman Yoke as a basic theory of power relations continued into the nineteenth century but was eventually supplanted by the more 'scientific' socialism that grew out of modern industrial capitalism.⁹⁹ Yet as we shall see, through the twin issues of poaching and the Game Laws, Norman Yoke theory retained an appeal beyond its traditionally accepted chronological limits. Following John Fisher's claim that the Game Laws are 'the outstanding example of class privilege in England from the Norman Conquest to the present day', this would seem to make sense.¹⁰⁰ Through providing a patriotic and readily understood account of 'stolen' (but reclaimable) popular rights, the Norman Yoke had an important place in the language and 'imaginative spirit' of radical politics up to the end of our period. The 'illustrative flourish' that Hill suggests the idea was ultimately reduced to, was of no less importance for being that.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Carolyn A. Conley, *The Unwritten Law: Criminal Justice in Victorian Kent* (Oxford, 1991), 199-201; Sir Thomas Skyrme, *History of the Justices of the Peace* vol. ii (Chichester, 1991), 116-26. Peter King has also emphasised the role of discretion for the pre-1831 period. Peter King, *Crime, Justice and Discretion in England, 1740-1840* (Oxford, 2000), 99-109.

⁹⁹ Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke' in John Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (London, 1954), 11.

¹⁰⁰ John Fisher, 'Property Rights in Pheasants: Landlords, Farmers and the Game Laws, 1860-80', *Rural History*, 11 (2000), 166.

¹⁰¹ Hill, 'Norman Yoke', 62. Norman Yoke theory retains a prominent place amongst modern advocates of greater access to the land. For example, John Bainbridge, *The Compleat Trespasser* (Fellside Books, 2014). The cover image for this book is a nineteenth-century illustration of a poacher by Charles Whymper (see Chapter 1).

This, then, is the story of how ‘the most lowly figure in hunting culture’ came to play an increasingly significant role in a national culture that looked ever more to the countryside for its true essence even as it continued as a site of both rhetorical, and physical, contestation.¹⁰² Concerning this study of the poacher in the English imagination, the central argument to be made is that over the course of the period in question two clearly discernible developments occurred. First, the poacher came to occupy a more prominent place in English culture than hitherto had been the case; and second, he came to be represented in a number of broadly positive ways that were not just rooted in the counter-cultural. A representational history of the English poacher has the potential to reveal much about popular notions of what does and does not constitute crime and legitimate challenges to authority, and of how an increasingly urban and industrialised society constructed aspects of the rural world for purposes of its own at a time when interest in the land and ‘the countryside’ reached unprecedented heights. Just as in Barry Reay’s phrase, there have been many ‘rural Englands’, there have also been many kinds of poacher available to populate it.¹⁰³

Approaches, Sources and Structure

In the early 1990s a call went out for more research to be done that engaged with ‘the cultures of the rural world and those who looked at the countryside from “outside” [or] how it was represented.’¹⁰⁴ An exemplar of this new methodology was *The English Rural Community: Images and analysis* – a collection of essays that took the developing cultural significance of the countryside as its main point of focus.¹⁰⁵ At around this time the existence of the ‘rural’ as a ‘social and cultural construction’ was also drawing the attention of cultural geographers keen to map the features of this discursive landscape.¹⁰⁶ Early in the following decade, Jeremy Burchardt was highlighting the existence of what he termed ‘another countryside’ that might usefully be explored through a ‘socio-cultural history’ that took representation as a key point of focus.¹⁰⁷ Returning to this theme in 2007, Burchardt envisioned a ‘new countryside history,

¹⁰² Emma Griffin, *Blood Sport: Hunting in Britain Since 1066* (New Haven, 2007), 9.

¹⁰³ Barry Reay, *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Alun Howkins, ‘Deserters from the Plough’, *History Today*, February 1993, 38.

¹⁰⁵ Short (ed.), *English Rural Community*.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Cloke and Nigel Thrift, ‘Refiguring the “Rural”’ in Paul Cloke et al, *Writing the Rural: five cultural geographies* (London, 1994), 3.

¹⁰⁷ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 2-3.

giving full weight to the cultural and representational aspects that have done so much to shape twentieth-century rural England.’¹⁰⁸

In pursuing this more culturally-centred approach to the countryside and its relations with the ‘outside’ world, others have stated the need for a broader approach to sources. Noting the continuing influence of Raymond Williams’ work, the editors of *The Country and City Revisited* (1999) suggested that alongside the kind of ‘canonical works of literature’ interpreted by Williams, the ‘texts of popular culture, including broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers, court records, and other archival materials both visual and verbal’ also be considered.¹⁰⁹ Although elite culture clearly has a part to play, it is to this broader source base that we need to turn if we are to bring the poacher and his representational presence more fully into view. Advocating a more rigorous approach to cultural history in 2004, Peter Mandler argued that in addition to focusing on ‘high and popular and middlebrow culture, on fantasy and experience’, such work should also attend more to the social and material contexts of production and reception. In particular, greater attention should be paid to the extent of the given representation’s ‘throw’.¹¹⁰ That in 1871 the (now) celebrated painter of moonlight, John Atkinson Grimshaw, produced *The Poachers* is certainly worth noting, but as the picture is not known to have entered the public domain during the period of our study its use remains limited.¹¹¹

Although consequent upon history’s ‘cultural turn’ a number of traditionally marginal figures have inspired detailed representational studies - for example, gypsies and dustmen have both been the focus of important work in recent years - the poacher has remained somewhat overlooked by historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹² Nevertheless, there have been some exceptions. In the field of English theatre, books by Gilbert B. Cross and Frederick Burwick have briefly considered representations of the poacher in the context of ‘domestic drama’, and covering the

¹⁰⁸ Jeremy Burchardt, ‘Agricultural History, Rural History, or Countryside History?’, *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 465.

¹⁰⁹ Gerald Maclean, Donna Landry, Joseph P. Ward (eds), *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850* (Cambridge, 1999), 3.

¹¹⁰ Peter Mandler, ‘The Problem with Cultural History’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 104, 113.

¹¹¹ John Atkinson Grimshaw, *The Poachers* (1871).

¹¹² Deborah Epstein Nord, *Gypsies in the British Imagination, 1807-1930* (NY, 2006); Brian Maidment, *Dusty Bob: A cultural history of dustmen, 1780-1870* (Manchester, 2007).

same period the art historian, Christiana Payne, has examined various pictorial representations.¹¹³ In addition, a number of scholarly collections of English ballads and folk-songs have included examples relating to poaching, whilst the valuable studies offered by Jones and Hopkins make some use of literary sources.¹¹⁴ However, a fully contextualised representational study of the English poacher that spans the years from just before the start of the Victorian era to the aftermath of the First World War has yet to be undertaken. If in terms of the coverage given to specific forms the length and complexity of our period has necessarily imposed constraints, the poacher's growingly significant place in the national culture, and the reasons for it, should nevertheless become clear.

Tracing the 'throw' of poacher representations in ballad and song, as well as newsprint, books, theatre and film, has been greatly facilitated by the digital revolution. Although not without its problems, the ongoing digitisation of text and image makes studies of this kind eminently more possible.¹¹⁵ Given the volume and range of material that is now available, the time has therefore come for the multiple meanings of the poacher to be explored more fully within the framework of an 'invented' English countryside that was simultaneously a very real, and perennially contested, physical space. Although work of this kind must always be mindful of David Cannadine's stricture that 'there is reality as well as representation', when it comes to so inherently theatrical a figure as the poacher, the latter must always be in play.¹¹⁶ For the purpose of what follows, 'representation' is taken to mean

[A] language, a form of communication, based on shared understandings between the author [in the wider sense of producer] and their audience. There are different systems of representation, or discourses, which provide author and audience with a context in which meaning is created ... Discourses can intersect and share meanings, but they can also contain specific meanings which change over time.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Gilbert P. Cross, *Next Week – East Lynne: Domestic Drama in Performance, 1820-1874* (Lewisburg, 1977); Burwick, *British Drama*; Christiana Payne, *Rustic Simplicity: Scenes of Cottage Life in Nineteenth-Century British Art* (Nottingham, 1998); Idem, 'Smugglers, Poachers and Wreckers in Nineteenth-Century English Painting', *Cahiers Victoriens Et Édouardiens*, 61 (2005), 161-75.

¹¹⁴ Roud and Bishop (eds), *English Folk Songs*, section ix; Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (Oxford, 1988), 47-50, 148-51; Jones, 'Poacher'; Hopkins, *Long Affray*.

¹¹⁵ See Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 9-23.

¹¹⁶ David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 2000), 17.

¹¹⁷ Karen Sayer, *Women of the fields. Representations of rural women in the nineteenth century* (Manchester, 1995), 1-2.

And following Patrick Joyce's work on the importance of narrative in the formation of social identities, representation is here seen as not simply reflecting the 'real' but actively helping to constitute it.¹¹⁸ Writing from the complementary perspective of cultural geography, Stephan Kohl notes the degree to which this process of representational construction, and reconstruction, has impacted upon the making of the poacher's natural habitat. According to Kohl, 'rural England' is an

aesthetically arranged combination of byroads, brooks, hedges, fields, small forests, thatched cottages and a few other ingredients. It is not the countryside, or nature, but a representation of the country, constructed from traditional material along conventional lines of combination ... But as the meaning of signifiers is determined by society, representations of nature do not have a natural meaning at all, rather, their meaning is open to redefinition by interested parties.¹¹⁹

Representations of the poacher will not only be considered in relation to this emergent sense of ruralism, and what we earlier termed the land-game nexus, but also within the context of melodrama – another significant discursive field in English cultural and political life for much of our period. Robert Corrigan has been far from alone in seeing melodrama as both 'the prevailing form of popular entertainment' and the 'dominant modality of all nineteenth-century British life and thought.'¹²⁰ With an expanding press, a growing electorate, and the emergence of the so-called 'platform', political debate became 'brisker, broader and freer' (as well as more nationally oriented). The ability of those seeking to form and court public opinion relied not just on 'popular eloquence' but on a developed sense of theatricality.¹²¹ As a recent study of the 'idea' of public opinion observes, Victorian and Edwardian politics were an 'intensely theatrical business'.¹²² On 'the platform', on the commercial stage, and across numerous other cultural forms, conflict over the Game Laws offered a ready source of emotionally-charged drama.

¹¹⁸ Patrick Joyce, 'The constitution and the narrative structure of Victorian politics' in James Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: New narratives in the political history of Britain's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1996), 179.

¹¹⁹ Stephan Kohl, 'Rural England: An Invention of the Motor Industries?' in Robert Burden and Stephan Kohl (eds), *Landscape and Englishness* (Amsterdam, 2006), 186-87.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Louis James 'Taking Melodrama Seriously: Theatre and Nineteenth-Century Studies', *History Workshop*, 3 (1977), 152.

¹²¹ George Watson, *The English Ideology: Studies in the language of Victorian politics* (London, 1973), 115.

¹²² James Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion', 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 2013), 17.

But of course the poacher was not just confined to Game Law melodrama. In line with wider cultural shifts, a possible way of charting the poacher's representational development is in the general move away from the melodramatic mode towards the ruralist one. Within this movement the poacher remains an essentially transgressive figure, but one who could also be absorbed into more mainstream channels. The 'Janus-faced' nature of the carnivalesque allows it to serve a range of dispensations.¹²³ As will be seen in Chapters Three and Four, the poachers admired by Peter Henry Emerson and Rudyard Kipling were vital to their sense of what a traditional (and essentially conservative) English rural community *should* be like. Finally, as studied through representations of the poacher, ruralism also takes us into the realms of both the English Land Question and of the nature of 'Englishness' itself.

In confining this study to England several considerations are at work. First, many representations of the poacher were the result of the cultural construction (reconstruction) of the English countryside evident in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the next. Second is the fact that historically the Game Laws differed between England and Scotland and Ireland. By confining this work to the former (and I am also excluding Wales here), greater focus and consistency will be achieved. I have also decided to focus only on the land-based poaching of winged and ground game as contained in the various Acts that were operational between 1831 and 1920 [see Appendix 1]. The laws governing the preservation and catching of fish fall under separate statutes, as do those regarding deer. By the start of our period the pheasant had essentially replaced the deer, at least in England, as the principal high status quarry, while the rabbit was the poacher's mainstay. Although the poaching of salmon in certain parts of England was undoubtedly significant, it is the poaching of ground and winged game that drew the most attention and carried the greater resonance. Riparian rights notwithstanding, the poaching of fish lacks the symbolically vital connection to the land.

The following will attempt to unfold the representational history of the poacher by tracing the broad shifts as they occurred in the years between 1830 and 1920, whilst simultaneously detailing key developments within the chronological span of each

¹²³ Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, 12-14.

chapter. The first chapter offers a survey of poacher representations from around the start of Victoria's long reign to within its final two decades. In terms of poacher representations this is a time of significant development and one that is tied closely to wider movements in English politics and society. The first part of the chapter examines the main trends in poaching and the Game Laws from the reform of 1831 to the passage of the Ground Game Act in 1880. The second part explores representations of the poacher over the same period and considers them largely against the backdrop of what might usefully be termed 'Game Law melodrama'. Here the poacher is mainly defined by what he is against and made victim of. By the close of this period, however, representations of the poacher were starting to take on more positive aspects as part of an emerging ruralist culture.

Chapters Two and Three focus on the years between 1880 and 1900. By this point representations of the poacher were becoming more about what he did, and the skills and values his actions embodied, as much as for what he was against. This is not to say that the poacher ceased to be an oppositional, or counter-cultural figure, or that all forms of poaching were viewed equally. As always, there remained 'poachers *and* poachers'. Chapter Two focuses largely on the growing convergence between the politics of increasingly intensive game preservation and the late nineteenth-century revival of the Land Question. The chapter also considers the reasons for poaching's apparent decline – a development with important representational consequences. Having established the political context for their creation, Chapter Three looks more specifically towards poacher representations in late-Victorian England. This was a time of marked expansion in range of cultural forms available, especially in the realm of visual media. It was also the moment when a heightened sense of emotional and ideological value began to be attached to the rural world and its inhabitants. The countryside and its apparently timeless ways became the true centre of the modern industrialised nation.

Chapter Four takes us through to the end of our period – a time when the shooting and preservation of game reached their historic peaks and when debates to do with the land, and how best to preserve and employ it, became 'debates about the nation and the character of its people, about the very nature of Englishness'.¹²⁴ Further cultural

¹²⁴ Paul Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914* (Woodbridge, 2008), 39.

expansion also occurred as the cinematograph established itself as a major entertainment form and publishing continued to develop and penetrate ever-widening markets. At a popular level English society also became ever more aware of its past (actual or mythic), which in turn fed, and extended, interest in the legends of Robin Hood and the life and times of Shakespeare. With the issues of land ownership and usage under such scrutiny, the idea of the Norman Yoke once more gained traction, whilst the more recent history of enclosure came under the spotlight too. All of this impacted upon representations of the poacher. Finally, when war came in 1914, the poacher would be literally and figuratively mobilised into the wider struggle.

As the following work seeks to reveal, a representational history of the poacher offers a fresh way of looking at a number of issues relating to English culture and society at a time of profound change and reorientation. Over the course of our ninety year period the poacher was firmly established as a valued part of rural, and thus national, life. How and why such a marginal figure emerged as a fully formed and pervasive presence in the nation's culture has a good deal to say about the nature of the society that produced and consumed it. If poaching has always been 'a great English fact', the ways in which it has been represented can indeed tell us much.¹²⁵ In his study of the growingly violent conflict over the politics of hunting and land use on the eve of the Civil War, Daniel Beaver suggests how 'the superficially eccentric often conceals the deeper patterns of culture'.¹²⁶ It is with this in mind that the following work is presented. As with the pockets of his fabled coat, the meanings of the English poacher have been numerous and deep.

¹²⁵ See fn. 1.

¹²⁶ Daniel C. Beaver, *Hunting and the Politics of Violence before the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 2012), ix.

Chapter One

From the Coverts to the Page: Poaching and its Representation c.1830-1880

There is hardly any petty mischief that is not connected with the life of a poacher.¹

[I]f we could only shut out the poacher from the fields and woods, either by physical or metaphysical barriers, so that he could no longer get at the game, that would be all that anybody would desire.²

The shocking thing about it is, that the poacher is right.³

In 1830 a new edition of the works of Hannah More appeared. The fourth volume centred on her 'Tales for the Common People', a series of tracts first produced in the 1790s in deliberate imitation of the penny chapbooks of the time.⁴ Written with an eye to entertainment as well as moral instruction, many of these tales proved popular and were reproduced in various forms up to, and beyond, the year of her death in 1833. One of these was *Black Giles the Poacher*, a story about an ungodly Somerset family dwelling in idle squalor at Mud Cottage. According to More, *contra* any defence which might come from the Bible, 'With poaching, much moral evil is connected'.⁵ Certainly in the case of Black Giles it would lead to a nasty end as he falls from the top of a rotting wall attempting to steal a partridge net.

Given her life's work, More would have been disappointed to read Henry Rider Haggard's 'Commonplace' book for 1898. 'It is extraordinary', noted the gentleman farmer and magistrate, 'what an amount of false sentiment is wasted in certain quarters on poachers who, for the most part, are very cowardly villains'.⁶ As Haggard's tone suggests, when it came to poachers the best-selling author was clearly out of step with popular opinion. Although the 'gangs of ruffians who go about with blackened faces',

¹ Hannah More, 'Black Giles the Poacher' in Clare Macdonald Shaw (ed.), *Tales for the Common People* (Nottingham, 2002, first published, 1801), 72.

² James Paterson, *The Game Laws of the United Kingdom* (London, 1861), xix.

³ A.H. Beesly, 'The Game Laws and the Committee of 1872', *Fortnightly Review*, March 1873, 355.

⁴ Shaw, *Tales*, x.

⁵ More, 'Black Giles', 73.

⁶ H. Rider Haggard, *A Farmer's Year: Being his Commonplace Book for 1898* (London, 1899), 228.

or the ‘skulking frequenter of the disreputable pot-house’, were still being roundly condemned, even members of the shooting community were confessing to ‘a sneaking sympathy’ for at least some types of poaching and admitting that if fortune had been different they might have turned to it themselves in fulfilment of their sporting instincts.⁷ In an early edition of the *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, Alex Innes Shand conceded how ‘There are poachers and poachers, and for some of them the genuine sportsman must feel sympathy and even regard.’⁸

Covering the ground between Black Giles’ shambling reappearance and the comments of Rider Haggard some sixty years later, the following three chapters will focus on the representational evolution of the poacher from the early 1830s to the end of the nineteenth century. Over the course of these years representational continuity is clearly to be found (‘black’ remains the colour of the poacher), but significant changes are evident too.⁹ Specifically, although remaining a powerful counter-figure to a contested set of laws and land-holding practices, the innate qualities and skills required of the successful poacher also began to receive more attention. During this period the poacher was thought about and depicted increasingly in terms of what he was *for* as for what he was against and made victim of. That this should be so relates to a number of factors more or less specific to the poacher and his activities, but which can also be linked to broader trends within Victorian society.

The current chapter divides into two sections. The first provides context by surveying the principal features of game preservation and poaching over the half-century following the Game Law reforms of 1831. What was happening on the ground in the ‘socially contested space’ of the sporting estate determined greatly what could, and did, happen at the level of representation.¹⁰ The second part covers the same fifty-year span but with the emphasis shifting more specifically to representation. In keeping with the fierce conflicts which marked the period, the so-called ‘melodramatic mode’ through

⁷ Alex Innes Shand, ‘Some Poachers’, *Badminton Magazine*, April 1896, 448; Rev. H.A. Macpherson, ‘The Hare and Lawyers’ in Alfred E.T. Watson (ed.), *The Hare* (London, 1896), 59; Colonel E.C.C. Hartop, *Sport in England: Past and Present* (London, 1894), 118.

⁸ Innes Shand, ‘Some Poachers’, 448.

⁹ It should be noted that more sympathetic accounts of the poacher pre-date the start of our period. See for example Tom Cordery in Mary Russell Mitford’s *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (London, 1828). However, Cordery does end up a despairing figure in the workhouse.

¹⁰ Mike Huggins, ‘Sport and the British Upper Classes c.1500-2000: A Historiographic Overview’, *Sport in History*, 28 (2008), 374.

which scholars have sought to explain the nature of nineteenth century politics is clearly evident in how the poacher and his actions were displayed.¹¹ Beginning with the next round of Game Law reform in 1880, and the Land Question's return to the front rank of national politics, Chapters Two and Three move on to consider the ways in which the poacher came to be seen in the closing years of Victoria's reign.

Game Laws and Poachers, c.1830-1880

In 1825 William Cobbett reported how 'The great business of life in the country, appertains, in some way or other, to the *game*.'¹² As Cobbett well knew, much of this 'business' was to do with poaching. When the sprawling system of Game Laws was finally reformed in 1831, one-seventh of all criminal convictions in England were for offences committed against them.¹³ With spring-guns and mantraps outlawed in 1827, and a softening of the Night Poaching Act (1817) the following year, the legislation was in part designed to ameliorate the worst excesses of the 'poaching war' as critics like Cobbett had been urging. By abolishing the archaic qualifications to take game, which in practice ensured that fewer people had the legal right to hunt it than to vote, the reform was also part of the Whig-led process of constitutional adjustment that found its most notable expression in the Great Reform Act of 1832. But if wider political reform encouraged greater domestic stability, the potential for disturbance remained. If never at the top of the list, a significant source of tension was the continued controversy over the Game Laws and the bitter conflicts they generated. Contrary to what its advocates had expected, the Act of 1831 seemed not to have reduced poaching at all. Rather, as with the ongoing rise in the preservation and shooting of game, there appeared to follow a similar trend in the activities of the poacher. By the 1840s poaching in some parts of the country was accounting for at least a quarter of all male criminal convictions, while at national level prosecutions for Game Law offences continued to rise until the peak year of 1877. Beyond the numbers actually recorded, the true extent of poaching was certainly much greater.¹⁴

¹¹ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalised Dissent in the English Market Place, 1800-1885* (Stanford, 1995); Joyce, 'Victorian politics' in Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution*, ch. 7.

¹² Quoted in Bovill, *English Country Life, 1780-1830* (Oxford, 1964), 174.

¹³ Pamela Horn, *The Rural World, 1750-1850* (London, 1980), 178.

¹⁴ John E. Archer 'Poachers Abroad' in Mingay (ed.), *Unquiet Countryside*, 54.

Furthermore, the escalating violence of the pre-reform years also seemed to have worsened. Within a year of the Night Poaching Act being extended to cover public highways and footpaths (1844), the recently elected MP for Durham, John Bright, was not only telling the Commons about the ‘Hundreds and thousands of persons ... fined and imprisoned’ for poaching, but of the ‘violent outrages, and encounters of the most ferocious character between gamekeepers and poachers’.¹⁵ But although Bright’s carefully prepared and dramatically-charged speech brought the cause of Game Law reform much publicity, the Select Committee he was instrumental in establishing would, like its successor in 1872-3, fail to effect any significant change and Game Law politics, along with the poaching and the violence, continued.¹⁶ To understand why this was so, we need to revisit what was intended to have been the solution.

Under the terms of the 1831 Act the hunting of game was made open to anyone who could afford the three-and-a-half guineas needed to purchase an annual licence. In practice, however, landowners retained their highly prized monopoly via a clause in the Act which allowed them to reserve the sporting rights for themselves. An acute summary of the new dispensation has been provided by Chester Kirby:

Privilege had been abolished, to be sure, but as the maintenance of sufficient game for sport in a thickly settled country required the expenditure of considerable sums, as sport was absolutely impossible without landed estates, and as the law made it a crime to trespass in pursuit of game, privilege seemed to persist.¹⁷

As well as being a continuing source of grievance in the countryside, dislike for the Game Laws cut across lines of class and geography. From the time of its establishment in the early 1840s, the satirical gaze of *Punch* would be consistently directed towards them. In ‘Lay of the Sporting Landlord’, a set of verses from 1845 in knowing imitation of ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’, the final stanza runs

Now here’s unto the Game Laws; / Long may they be in force!
And here’s to every magistrate / Who gives the Law its course:
A dungeon to each poacher, / That dwells both far and near.
Oh ’tis all my aim to preserve my game / At all seasons of the year.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Hansard*, Third Series, 27th February 1845, 54. The following month Bright gave a speech on the same subject in St. Albans.

¹⁶ Part of Bright’s research had included a communication with ‘the greatest poacher in England’, the Suffolk-based Frederick Gowing. See Fancis Feris, ‘The speech preparation of John Bright’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 17 (1931), 497.

¹⁷ Chester Kirby, ‘The Attack on the English Game Laws in the Forties’, *Journal of Modern History*, 4 (1932), 20.

¹⁸ *Punch*, vol. viii, 1845, 31.

A quarter of a century later the eminent historian, and humanitarian, E.A. Freeman, was linking the modern Game Laws to the ‘accursed forest laws of old times’, whilst shooting was nothing but ‘sickening butchery’.¹⁹ ‘Totally at variance with the national character’, was William Howitt’s summation of the laws that surrounded ‘the sacred head of game’.²⁰

Meanwhile, the tensions that had previously drawn elements of the ‘middling sort’ towards poaching in response to their exclusion from the right to take game also persisted into the post-reform era.²¹ The social pretensions of the ‘cockney sportsmen’ might have been the subject of humour, but he also drew attention to the layers of privilege and social coding that still surrounded his chosen pursuit. Reflecting the trend towards the classification of social groups and types, a practice that informed contemporary notions of a distinct ‘criminal class’, John Henry Walsh’s *Manual of British Rural Sports* (first published in 1856) defined four main types of poacher: the London (or gang) poacher; the regular rural poacher; the poaching labourer; and the so-called ‘poaching gent’. The latter being ‘a man who is ardently fond of shooting, and yet has not the opportunity of indulging his appetite for sport, from want of land to shoot over.’²²

Apart from cementing their own rights to hunt game, landlords had also benefited from the new arrangements by gaining the option of extending the right, by invitation or by hire, to those without land and preserves of their own. In the latter case we have the origins of the commercially let shooting estates that became a significant part of rural life as the century progressed. At the same time, the right to buy and sell game (subject to licence) was confirmed, providing a further incentive for increased preservation. In addition to holding back for own use, and the making of gifts, the records held by a typical sporting estate in Norfolk reveal growing use of the marketplace to offload the rising quantities of game killed.²³ By the 1860s a leading estate like Holkham, also in

¹⁹ E.A. Freeman, ‘The Morality of Field Sports’, *Fortnightly Review*, 1st October 1869, 374, 377.

²⁰ William Howitt, *Letters on the Game Laws* (London, 1863), 58.

²¹ King, *Crime*, 211.

²² John Henry Walsh, *Manual of British Rural Sports* (Stroud, 2008, first publ. 1856), 5-7. And see Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in Twentieth-Century England* (Harlow, 2011), 70-82.

²³ Norfolk Record Office. Bulwer of Heydon Family Papers, Game Books and Accounts, 1829-1908. BUL 11 / 159-196.

Norfolk, was regularly sending game by the several tons to Leadenhall market in London.²⁴

But it wasn't just the terms of the 1831 Act that led to growing concentrations of game and more land and resources devoted to it. To the regret of traditionalists, significant advances in fire-arms technology and increased use of the *battue* (the practice of walking in line through a cover while beaters flushed out the game) were changing both the character and physical environment of their sport.²⁵ An excellent example of this can be found in *Gamonía*, a guide to the creation and management of game plantations first published in 1837 and dedicated to the future prime minister, and owner of the Knowsley estate in Cheshire, the 14th Earl of Derby. 'The introduction of Battues', advised the book's author, 'require extensive preserves and numerous covers for the encouragement of game.'²⁶ Derby's own well-stocked preserves would later be the scene of a fatal affray between keepers in his employ and members of the Liverpool-based Long Company – an incident that would be sympathetically recorded in several poaching ballads.²⁷

Expansion was further encouraged by the development of a comprehensive rail network, giving access to the most far-flung sporting estates and grouse moors, along with the growing identification of royalty with the sport: first in the form of Prince Albert, but even more so in the ample shape of his son, the future Edward VII. Privately purchased in 1862, the Sandringham estate was largely given over to lavish shooting parties which in turn set the fashion for others to follow.²⁸ With the accuracy and killing power of sporting guns continuing to improve, along with the movement from *battue* to 'drive', shooting became a highly desirable, and highly exclusive, recreation for the wealthy and privileged of Victorian England combining carefully ordered social ritual with a means

²⁴ 'Norman Pollock, 'The English Game Laws in the Nineteenth Century' (PhD thesis, Johns Hopkins, 1968), 249.

²⁵ Griffin, *Blood Sport*, 118-23, 154-157; Michael Brander, *Hunting and Shooting* (London, 1971), ch. 7.

²⁶ Lawrence Rawstorne, *Gamonía* (London, 1905, first publ. 1837), 1.

²⁷ 'The Liverpool Poachers' in Bodleian Ballads, Firth Collection, c.26 (125); 'Lines on the Execution of Roberts the Poacher' in BB, Harding Collection, B20 (198).

²⁸ Brian P. Martin, *The Great Shoots* (London, 1999), 11-15, 123-26. For a vivid account of a day's shooting at Sandringham see Louise Cresswell, *Eighteen Years on the Sandringham Estate* (Dehli, 2008, first publ. 1887), 59-62.

of displaying ‘éclat’ in the field.²⁹ With the appearance of specially designed gun rooms, even the architecture of the country house came to reflect this new fascination for the shoot.³⁰ ‘Land gives you so much more than rent’, observed Archdeacon Grantly in Anthony Trollope’s *Last Chronicle of Barset*, ‘It gives you position and influence and political power, to say nothing about the game.’³¹

Within this setting of greater concentrations of game, plus widening outlets for disposal, the continued high levels of poaching, both individually and in groups, can in part be explained. Certainly at the time these were thought to be contributory factors. For the Duke of Grafton, one of the ‘great evils’ arising from modern game preserving was its tendency to draw men ‘from the path of legitimate industry to the exciting and pernicious employment of poaching.’³² According to the *Sporting Magazine*, it was ‘notorious that gangs of poachers’ were openly exploiting the legalisation of the game market to expand their ‘nefarious trade’.³³ At the level of recorded statistics at least, the evidence suggests that commercially driven gang-based poaching, especially in areas where preserves and more urbanised settlements ran close together, was indeed a major reason for poaching’s increase across most of the period.³⁴

Conforming strongly to prevailing ideas of a professional criminal class, these were the ‘iron age’ poachers who reportedly ‘infested’ the countryside and formed ‘nests’ in areas of unprotected woodland.³⁵ The period’s numerous publications offering advice on game preservation often classed poachers as a type of vermin. Anathema to landowners, the alleged depredations of these gangs were a key reason behind the request of twenty-eight chief constables in December 1861 for greater powers to deal with the problem.³⁶ The resulting Poaching Prevention Act (1862) enabled the police to stop and search anyone suspected of poaching or of abetting. Consequently, notes one

²⁹ Delabere P. Blaine, *An Encyclopaedia of Rural Sports* (London, 1852), 718. In the ‘drive’ stationary shooters are positioned outside of the covert while the birds are driven over the guns – ideally as fast and high as possible.

³⁰ Pamela Horn, *High Society: The English Social Elite, 1880-1914* (Stroud, 1992), 130-31.

³¹ Quoted in Raymond Carr, *English Fox Hunting* (London, 1986), 153.

³² Duke of Grafton, *A Letter to the Magistrates of the Western Division of the County of Suffolk on the Preservation of Game* (London, 1844), 3-4, 7.

³³ *Sporting Magazine*, January 1833, 217-8.

³⁴ Osborne and Winstanley, ‘Rural and Urban Poaching’, 88-96.

³⁵ T.E. Kebbel, ‘Poaching’, *Cornhill Magazine*, September 1867, 348; John Harvey, *The English Game Laws Considered and Compared with the Game Laws of Other Countries* (London, 1872), 13.

³⁶ HO 45/7210. A copy of this Memorial was printed as a Parliamentary Paper in May 1862. BPP, XLV.219. And see the *Field*, 28th December 1862.

historian of Victorian policing, the powers of the recently formed county forces were 'extended in a way that was precisely useful to the traditional rulers of rural England'.³⁷ This point that did not escape the Act's many critics. Aside from being disproportionate and deeply 'un-English', it was felt that the law had effectively turned the rural police into rate-payer funded gamekeepers who were more likely to target innocent labourers than anyone guilty of poaching.³⁸ Whatever the effectiveness of the Act, it certainly widened the perceptual gap between popular opinion and those apparently selfish members of the shooting community who appeared always to put their own interests first.

If the rural economy was now largely based on a tripartite division of agricultural labourers, tenant farmers and landlords, in explaining the continuing high levels of poaching we need also to consider the middle group in this structure. When launching his attack on the Game Laws in 1845, Bright was seeking to create dissonance between farmers and their landlords in the hope of persuading the former to join the existing campaign against the Corn Laws. From the opening number of the *League*, the Anti-Corn Law League's newspaper, heavy criticism of the Game Laws had been a persistent theme.³⁹ Central to the ACLL's argument was that by effectively barring tenant farmers from hunting over the land they occupied the 1831 Act was a classic example of 'landlordism'. Coupled with this was the resentment that many farmers had come to feel over the issue of crop damage and disturbance caused by large concentrations of ground and winged game found on or near their holdings.⁴⁰ With dislike of overbearing gamekeepers also common, a section of rural society that might otherwise have been 'down' on poaching could often be found colluding, or even participating, in the activity.⁴¹

Yet if farmers might be added to the ranks of possible poachers, the numerical core was undoubtedly formed of the most vulnerable members of the labouring classes. Although

³⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Policing the Victorian Community: The formation of English provincial police forces, 1856-1880* (London, 1984), 150.

³⁸ *Sunday Times*, 27th July 1862; F.M.L. Thompson, 'Landowners' in Mingay (ed.), *Unquiet Countryside*, 82-83.

³⁹ Richard F. Spall, 'Landlordism and Liberty: Aristocratic Misrule and the Anti-Corn Law League', *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, viii (1987), 220-1.

⁴⁰ David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (London, 1979), 141-43.

⁴¹ BPP, IX II.1, 1846, *Report of the Select Committee on the Game Laws*, xxix-xxxii; Jones, 'Poacher', 844-45.

hotly disputed at the time, poaching levels were clearly prone to increase when employment was scarce or when household budgets were otherwise compromised; a situation compounded by rising population levels and changes to the administration of the Poor Law in the mid-1830s, which in turn led to the widely voiced sentiment of ‘anything’ but the workhouse. The mid-century testimony of a twenty-four-year old Suffolk labourer given three months for poaching (he was a previous offender) makes the point well:

I had no work; they would not employ me because I had been a poacher. They wanted me to go into the ‘house,’ and I would rather go to the gaol than the house. I was caught with a leveret. I do not think I might as well have taken anything else; the leveret is wild. Many people would be friends with a poacher, but would not like to be friends with a man convicted of felony.⁴²

The reference to leverets is also significant as it was ground game (hares and rabbits) that typically comprised the bulk of the poacher’s haul. Equally, it was daytime trespass in pursuit of these animals, especially rabbits, which constituted the great majority of poaching offences. Though not strictly classed as ‘game’, rabbits were nevertheless included in the 1831 Act (they were also included in the Night Poaching Acts of 1828 & 1844, and the Poaching Prevention Act of 1862). Harder to poach, winged game was usually targeted by the more committed and seasoned poachers.

Lastly, as historians of social crime have consistently argued, integral to the view that poaching was not essentially criminal was its potential use as an act of protest from the otherwise disenfranchised. The well-known Suffolk poacher, Frederick Gowing, spoke for many when he told the 1846 Select Committee that ‘A poacher is not a thief ... A thief is not a poacher, and poaching is not thieving.’⁴³ From the Game Laws and their administration, to the undermining and proscribing of traditional rural sports and customs, beyond purely material concerns there were numerous grievances woven into the fabric of the Victorian countryside.⁴⁴ In the decades between the suppression of Swing and the emergence of agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s, poaching was about politics as well as the pot. Recounting the long-running dispute over the rights to hunt rabbits on the Holt Lows in Norfolk, Robert Lee has suggested how ‘Poaching had

⁴² John Glyde, *Suffolk in the Nineteenth Century: Physical, Social, Moral, Religious, And Industrial* (London, 1856), 154-55.

⁴³ BPP, IX I.1, 1846, *Report of the Select Committee on the Game Laws*, 630.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, 1973), chs. 6-7; Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England, 1700-1880* (London, 2011, first publ. 1982), chs. 5-7.

become a much more prominent and politically-loaded offence since the era of Parliamentary enclosure'.⁴⁵ And for those outside of the rural world, though cognisant of life within it, such 'transgressions of elite codes' could be enjoyed vicariously, even as they were presented as a dangerous challenge to law and order and a step on the road to greater crimes.⁴⁶

This, then, is the context in which the period's numerous poacher representations were produced and played out for a growing, and increasingly literate, population. With more efficient printing processes, cheaper paper and improving transportation and distribution networks, the second quarter of the nineteenth century saw a huge variety of popular literature and journalism coming on to the market as part of a nascent mass culture that was 'ever more pictorial'.⁴⁷ These developments played a key role in creating and sustaining what Benedict Anderson has termed the 'imagined community' in which members 'will never know most of their fellow-members ... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.'⁴⁸ Within this expanding cultural community it was increasingly possible to hear and 'know' of all manner of English poachers without ever actually encountering them. If communications technology was creating an 'enlarged universe of political discourse' (within which debates over the Game Laws were often to be found), it was similarly expanding the potential of the representational poacher.⁴⁹ Produced for a variety of audiences and employing not just the printed word, but image and performance too, the poacher representations of these years also display clear elements of intertextuality. In a neat example of the cultural-crossovers in which poaching might now feature, we find the verses in Edward Lloyd's typical broadside account of the murder of Jane Jones (1842), containing the instruction: 'Tune – "The Gallant Poachers"'.⁵⁰ As Rosalind Crone's work on nineteenth-century representations of violence has suggested, 'the interconnectedness of Victorian popular culture was all-important'.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Robert Lee, *Unquiet Country: Voices of the Rural Poor* (Macclesfield, 2005), 117.

⁴⁶ Scott, *Weapons*, 41.

⁴⁷ Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860* (Oxford, 1991), 198.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Mary L. Shannon, *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street* (Farnham, 2015), 4-5.

⁴⁹ J. Thompson, *British Political Culture*, 23.

⁵⁰ Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester, 2012), 212-14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

At the heart of these representations was melodrama. Aside from being the form of theatrical practice which dominated the popular stage, scholars have argued that melodrama was a ‘modus operandi’ of Victorian society and provided ‘part of the cultural capital of modernity’.⁵² In this broader meaning of the term, radical politicians like Bright were expert practitioners of the ‘melodramatic mode’, while political campaigns of the period made full use of so-called ‘melodramatic tactics.’⁵³ With its apparently clear-cut oppositions reduced and contained within the ongoing struggle between the poacher and the keeper, conflict over the Game Laws could itself be played out as a form of ‘rough melodrama’, complete with its own distinctive *mise en scene*.⁵⁴ Moreover, the enclosed and closely guarded world of the game preserve offered an easily recognised signifier of wider social injustice. ‘The world is rich, well stocked’ observes one of the characters in Douglas Jerrold’s 1830 drama, *Sally in Our Alley*. ‘As my lord’s garden’, replies another, ‘But there is a wall, a huge spiked wall, around it; and on every twentieth tree is written, “Spring-guns and mantraps set in these grounds’’.⁵⁵

Representing the Poacher, c.1830-1880

Over the course of this fifty year period the poacher and the Game Laws became the object of increasing cultural engagement. Just as poaching had a number of possible motives, so too did those who recorded it. When it came to representing the poacher, both profit and politics were in play. Before examining the ways in which the poacher was realised by artists and dramatists of the time, we shall first consider some examples of print and materially-based culture. Exceptions can certainly be found, but the emphasis here tends to be less on the poacher’s distinctive skill-set, and more about the system of laws he is caught up in. In this struggle there could of course be agency, but in a classic trope of melodrama (in the dramaturgical sense) the poacher was generally made to act out his part within a wider narrative of conflict. Taking a somewhat different tack, the chapter concludes by examining the influential writings of Richard Jefferies. As will be shown, his highly regarded books on game-keeping and poaching

⁵² Jim Davis, ‘Melodrama On and Off the Stage’, in Juliet John (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford, 2016); Rohan McWilliam, ‘Melodrama’, in Pamela K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Chichester, 2011), 55.

⁵³ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, 3.

⁵⁴ Hopkins, *Long Affray*, 265.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Cross, *Next Week*, 186.

marked an important representational dividing line between the years covered by the current chapter and those that follow.

Game Law melodramas: from poaching broadsides to figurines

Contrary to what their generally crude and archaic appearance might suggest, broadside ballads retained a significant cultural presence across much of our period and reached an audience far exceeding that recorded by sales alone.⁵⁶ Acting as a key influence on the representational practices of the developing popular press, as driven by men like Edward Lloyd, they were also the principal means by which the ‘peasant’ singers fêted by the composers and song collectors of the late-Victorian and Edwardian folk-song movement acquired their repertoires. Just as the words of the ballads flowed back and forth between printed text and oral transmission, so they moved readily between urban and rural contexts. Produced for a paying public, the ballads necessarily sought to articulate the thoughts and feelings of large sections of the population and were an important source of news, instruction and political comment. They also sought to entertain with dramatic or humorous tales that often touched upon transgressive or deviant behaviour.⁵⁷ As such, broadside ballads were an important medium for carrying representations of the poacher and must call in to question George Rudé’s claim that after 1830 the ‘community appeal’ of poaching was diminished.⁵⁸

Among the catalogues of Thomas Pearson, a Manchester-based printer and seller of broadsides operating in the 1870s, can be found many of the best-known poaching ballads of the time.⁵⁹ Not only was the poacher ‘a principal character in the ballads of the city dweller’, through well-developed distribution networks accounts of his actions were readily available to other audiences too.⁶⁰ Included amongst Pearson’s stock was ‘Oakham Poachers’, a ballad that had already found its way into Eleanor Eden’s record of the Essex farm-labourer turned navvy, ‘Bill’. Having told of his own poaching

⁵⁶ Cameron Nunn, “‘Come all you Wild and Wicked Youths’: Representations of Young Male Convicts in Nineteenth-Century English Broadsides”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20 (2015), 455-56.

⁵⁷ Steve Roud, ‘Introduction’ in David Atkinson and Steve Roud (eds), *Street Ballads in Nineteenth Century Britain, Ireland and North America* (Farnham, 2014), ch. 1.

⁵⁸ George Rudé, *Criminal and Victim: Crime and Society in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1985), 85.

⁵⁹ Manchester Central Library (Special Collections), Pearson Collection, BRf 398.8 S9.

⁶⁰ Joyce, *Visions*, 244. On the distribution of ballads see Leslie Shepard, *The History of Street Literature* (Newton Abbot, 1973), ch. 4.

experiences, Bill concludes by giving Eden ‘one of our old poaching songs ... Most all the navvies sings it’ [sic].⁶¹ In addition to being widely diffused, unlike the popular tales of highwaymen or celebrated thieves such as Jack Sheppard, those attaching to poachers not only drew upon established tradition, but also on topicality. Here we might consider ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher.’ Centred on a part of the country where poaching was reportedly ‘a major rural industry’, this celebration of the poacher’s life retained an enduring appeal across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and remains the best known of all poaching ballads [Fig. 1.1].⁶²

BOLD POACHER,
OR,
MY DELIGHT ON A SHINY NIGHT

When I was bound 'prentice in fair Lincolnshire,
I served my master for nearly seven years,
'Till I got up to poaching, as quickly you shall hear,
It was my delight in a shiny night, in the season of the year.

As I and my comrades were setting of a snare,
The gamekeeper was watching us, for him we did not care,
For I could wrestle or fight my boys or jump over any where, [year]
It was my delight in a shiny night, in the season of the year.

As I and my comrades were setting four or five,
And going to take them up again, we found a hare alive,
I have her in the bag, my boys, and through the woods we steer, [year]
It was my delight in a shiny night, in the season of the year.

I hung her over my shoulder and rambled to the town,
I called at a neighbour's house and sold her for a crown
I sold her for a crown my boys, but I never told you where, [year]
It was my delight in a shiny night, in the season of the year.

Here's to every poacher that lives in Lincolnshire,
And here's to every gamekeeper that wants to buy a hare,
But now to every keeper that wants to keep his deer,
It was my delight in a shiny night, in the season of the year.

24
Cadman, Printer, 152, Gt. Ancoats, Manchester.

THE SAILOR'S RETURN

As a fair maid walked in a garden,
A brisk young sailor chanced to spy,
He stepped up to her thinking to have her,
And said fair maid can you fancy I.

You appear to be a man of honour,
A man of honour you appear to be,
How can you impose on a poor woman,
Who is not fit your servant to be.

If you are not fit to be my servant,
I have a sincere regard for you,
I would marry and make you a lady,
For I have servants to wait on you.

I have a true sweetheart of my own,
It is seven years since he was gone,
And seven years more I will wait for him,
For if he's living he will return.

'Tis seven years since your lover left you,
I'm sure he's either dead or drown'd,
If he's living I love him dearly,
If he's dead with glory he's crown'd.

When he perceived her love was loyal,
It is a pity true love should be crown'd,
Says he I am thy poor and single sailor,
Who has often on the ocean been toss'd.

If you are my poor and single sailor,
Shew me the token you gave to me,
For seven years it makes an alteration,
Since my true lover has parted from me.

He pull'd his hand out of his bosom,
His fingers being long and small,
Saying here's the ring we broke between us
When she saw it down she did fall.

Then he lifted her up clasped in his arms,
And gave her kisses one two and three
Saying I am thy poor and single sailor,
Who is just returned to marry thee.

© Bodleian Library
Frame: 01271 A 6

1.1 Printed by J. Cadman, Manchester, c.1850-55. Image courtesy of the Bodleian Library. Note the variant titles here. Other versions of the ballad went under the title ‘The Gallant Poachers’ or simply ‘The Poachers’.

⁶¹ Eden, *Working Man*, 32-33; PC, no. 354.

⁶² Chenevix Trench, *Poacher and Squire*, 169.

In addition to its numerous manifestations as a broadside, adding greatly to this ballad's 'throw' (and status) was its inclusion in prestigious anthologies of 'national' music like William Chappell's *Popular Music of the Olden Time*.⁶³ On a less elevated plane it was also included in the *Universal Melodist* (1848), a cheaply-priced collection aimed at the mass market.⁶⁴ According to one of the great authorities on broadside ballads, Frank Kidson, it became an 'immensely popular' song and was 'much whistled and sung in the streets and in country alehouses.'⁶⁵ Taking a variety of regional forms it also became an established 'playhouse song' and was part of the repertoire of the English Tom Thumb (Richard Gurnsey).⁶⁶ As one of six scenes and sketches, which also included John Bull and Sir Roger de Coverley, the diminutive entertainer would perform in appropriate costume 'The Somersetshire Poacher'.⁶⁷ Again using the Somerset ('Zummerset') setting, one of the first generation of music hall stars, Sam Cowell, included 'The Poachers' as part of his repertoire and it was later included in an anthology of songs made popular by him.⁶⁸

The appeal of 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' is not hard to discern: bold young men take to the surrounding woods and fields to successfully bag some hares; the keepers are bested, but no-one gets hurt, and the action unfolds under a 'shiny' night sky. Taking the key word from the song, this is poaching as arcadian 'delight'. Widely appreciated as a typically English song, the poachers of this representation could be seen as part of a harmonising national archetype in their assertion of a manly independence that is rooted in the traditions of the countryside. The fact of hares being taken, an animal with its own deep roots in English folk-lore, adds further to this.⁶⁹ At the same time, however, our poachers from Lincolnshire are using their wits and physicality to break the law and get paid for it. In some versions of the ballad, magistrates and squires are also mocked alongside the ineffectual keepers. If only for a moment, the world is turned upside down and the apprenticed labourers come out on top. This, then, is poaching as a form

⁶³ William Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time: A Collection of Ancient Songs, Ballads, and Dance Tunes Illustrative of the National Music of England* (London, 1859), 732; and see Bell, *Ancient Poems*, 216-17.

⁶⁴ E. David Gregory, *Victorian Songhunters: The Recovery and Editing of English Vernacular Ballads and Folk Lyrics, 1820-1883* (Lanham, 2006), 200.

⁶⁵ Alfred Moffat and Frank Kidson, *The Minstrelsy of England* (London, 1901), 118.

⁶⁶ Roud and Bishop, *English Folk Songs*, 502-3.

⁶⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 27th December 1845; *Sunday Times*, 4th January 1846.

⁶⁸ D'Alcorn's Musical Miracles, *120 Comic Songs by Sam Cowell* (London, 1878), 47.

⁶⁹ George Ewart Evans and David Thomson, *The Leaping Hare* (London, 1974).

‘carnival’ and in its wide dissemination a reminder that in Victorian society there were ‘discourses other than those of civility and discipline’.⁷⁰ In one of the period’s hugely popular ‘Newgate Novels’ the celebrated gaol-breaker and former apprentice, Jack Sheppard, distracts his guards with a lively rendition of ‘The Poacher’s Song’ – in phrasing and sentiment an obvious borrowing from ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’.⁷¹

Clearly revealing these tensions we have Chappell’s accompanying notes to the song which record how on the one hand it had been a favourite of George IV but yet remained ‘rather too well known among the peasantry.’⁷² Comments such as these clearly highlight elite concerns that in the popular mind poaching was still considered to be a legitimate activity. Following in the wake of public moralists like Hannah More, the period is therefore rich in a form of instructional literature focusing on the evils of poaching and the ruination it could bring.⁷³ Not surprisingly, a great deal of this was produced by clerics or by groups otherwise concerned with religious education. The attacks on the Game Laws made by Charles Kingsley in *Yeast* (although he never went so far as to actually defend the poacher), were not typical of his kind. Moreover, unlike Kingsley, many country clergymen readily took their places on the local bench and often sat in judgement on poaching cases. A typical example of the genre is *Old Johnson, The Reformed Poacher*, first produced by York Friends Tract Association in 1857 and reissued in the 1870s. In this case the story tells of John Johnson, a husband and father of four, who is eventually transported for robbing a fishpond (it was axiomatic that poaching invariably led to other forms of theft). Learning of his poor wife’s demise Johnson turns to God and with the help of the Society of Friends communicates his regrets on being a poacher to his remaining three children. Although repentant, Johnson will never see his homeland again and dies an exile in Van Diemen’s Land.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Peter K. Andersson, ‘How Civilised Were the Victorians?’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20 (2015), 450.

⁷¹ Lincoln Fortescue, *The Life and Adventures of Jack Sheppard* (London, 1845), 314-15.

⁷² Chappell, *Ancient Songs*, 732.

⁷³ See Edmund Phipps, ‘The Poacher’s Progress’, *New Monthly Magazine and Humourist*, April 1841, 487-97. For the poacher more as a victim of circumstance see William and Mary Howitt, ‘The Poacher’s Progress’ in their *Stories of English and Foreign Life* (London, 1853), 485-96.

⁷⁴ York Friends’ Tract Association, *Old Johnson, The Reformed Poacher* (York, 1857). The poacher dying in exile in Van Diemen’s Land was also the subject of popular stage drama. W.T. Moncreiff, *Van Diemen’s Land: An Operatic Drama* (Cumberland edition, London, c.1855, first performed 1830).

Also referencing transportation, if from a rather different perspective, are a pair of ballads from around the start of our period that were probably inspired by the Lent assizes at Warwick in 1829. On this occasion no less than twenty-eight poachers were transported for their crimes.⁷⁵ Although a punishment not normally resulting from Game Law offences, popular perceptions (then and now) have tended to play up the number of ‘spirited poachers’ who were made to suffer this fate.⁷⁶ While far from celebrating the life of the poacher, and serving in part as cautionary tales, ‘Van Diemen’s Land’ and ‘Young Henry the Poacher’ remain broadly supportive of their subject and far removed from the censoriousness to be found in *Old Johnson*. Both ballads remained popular long after the events they recorded. Designed for the largest possible market, ballads dealing with crime or political affairs were usually pitched at what was thought to be the taste and interest of the buying public.⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, as the *New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* records, ‘Poachers and smugglers, in particular, are almost always treated sympathetically.’⁷⁸ To an extent this even applied to the activities of the poaching gang as ballads like ‘The Liverpool Poachers’ and ‘Sudborough Heroes’ make clear [Fig. 1.2].

In the simple illustration accompanying the latter ballad, an obvious attempt has been made to combine a sense of poaching’s deep past with the recent events described in the text: the words recall an encounter on a January evening in 1837 on Lord Cardigan’s estate in Northamptonshire.⁷⁹ Although later collectors of broadsides tended to privilege the word over the image, at the time of their production and consumption such illustrations were integral to the form. Easily pasted on to walls, it was not uncommon to use broadsides as a cheap form of decoration in popular social spaces like pubs and coffee-houses, thus further diffusing the ballad’s message.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Roy Palmer, ‘The origin of Van Diemen’s Land and Young Henry the Poacher: A Hypothesis’, *Folk Music Journal*, 3 (1976), 161-40.

⁷⁶ Keith Hancock, quoted in Brian Fletcher, ‘Australia’s Convict Origins – Myth and History’, *History Today*, 42 (October 1992), 41. According to one leading authority, poachers accounted for less than one in four hundred of male transportees. A.G.L. Shaw, *Convicts and the colonies: a study of penal transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and other parts of the British Empire*, (Dublin, 1998, first publ. 1966), 158.


⁷⁷ Charles Elkins, ‘The Voice of the Poor: The Broadside as a Medium of Popular Culture and Dissent in Victorian England’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14 (1980), 262-74.

⁷⁸ Roud and Bishop, *English Folk Songs*, 322.

⁷⁹ F.J. Mayes, ‘A Poaching Incident at Sudborough, 1837’, *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, vi (1982-3), 325-28.). For the ballad itself see BB, Harding Collection, B11 (3689).

⁸⁰ Thomas Gretton, *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny Prints, 1800-1860* (London, 1980), 7-9; Anderson, *Printed Image*, 19-22.

3689



SUDBOROUGH HEROES

In Eighteen hundred and thirty seven,
As plainly does appear,
A bloody scene was felt most keen,
Till death it did draw near.
Of poor Sam May's of Sudborough town,
A lad of well known fame,
Who took delight both day and night,
To chase the lofty game.

CHORUS.

Mourn all you gallant poachers mourn,
Poor May's is dead and gone,
An hero brave laid in his grave,
As ever the sun shine on.

With net so strong they march'd along,
Unto brave Deanthorpe town,
With nut brown ale that ne'er did fail,
And many health drank round.
Brave Luna light did shine that night,
To the woods they did repair.
True as the sun the dogs did run,
And chase the timid hare.

A lofty breeze among the trees,
While shiner he came on,
Like Cain he stood seeking for blood,
With his bayonet and his gun.
Then he did charge with shot quite large,
John Millow we did spy,
But little did we think that night,
One of us should die.

Then to engage the poachers,
The keepers they did start,

And so with strife took poor May's life,
And stab'd him to the heart,
For help he cried but was denied
No one there by him stood,
And there he lay till break of day,
Dogs licking his dear blood.

Lee, Swan and Newton where the men
That nobly stood their ground,
While with staves and spears the keepers
Had.

All through the woods did sound,
But Lee receives a dreadful wound,
For help aloud he cried,
But little did we think that night,
For May was doom'd to die.

There brave Jim Stevens ne'er will fail,
To crown poor Sam May's name,
His comrades brave defies each knave,
That travels o'er the plain,
With dog and gun they now will run,
Tho' the law it don't remain,
For poor May's blood spilt in the wood,
For vengeance cries aмин.

Farewell dear heart since I must part,
From wife and children dear,
To pay my doom it was too soon,
That ever I came here.

Farewell unto those dear brave lads,
Whomsoever range the fields,
That cruel man is murdering hand
Has caused me for to yield.

Henson, Letter-press and Copper-plate Printer,
Near the South Bridge, Northampton.

© Bodleian Library

Frame: 04614

1.2 Printed by Henson of Northampton c.1837. Image courtesy of the Bodleian Library.

By having the poacher going after deer, rather than the hares and rabbits which in fact were the gang's real quarry, the action is elevated to the mythically heroic by its easily made links to the stories of Robin Hood. At the time of this ballad's appearance, the legend was undergoing a major revival in interest with representations of the bold outlaw being constructed and used to support a range of cultural and political concerns. One of these, observes Stephanie L. Barczewski, was the kind of 'less focused sort of popular radicalism which incorporated much rhetoric about the rights and liberties of the people' in which the outlaw (who was also of course a poacher) 'functioned as a heroic embodiment of freedom and independence.'⁸¹

⁸¹ Stephanie L. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford, 2000), 75. See also Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford, 1994), ch. 5.

Important as they were for expressing anti-Game Law sentiment, dislike for what the prolific working-class writer, Thomas Miller, described as these ‘cruel, tyrannous, and unjust’ laws extended far beyond the rough sheets of the broadside.⁸² Author of a history of the Anglo Saxons, Miller was both a strong adherent to the idea of the Norman Yoke and a vocal critic of the more recent process of parliamentary enclosure. An obvious attraction of Norman Yoke theory for radicals like Miller was that it helped inform the developing populist narrative of a ‘lost golden age’ and turned the people’s ongoing struggle to recover it into an act of ‘radical patriotism.’⁸³ As Malcolm Chase observes, the Norman Yoke was as much connotative as it was denotative, and it wasn’t necessary for it to be demonstrably true to have ideological value.⁸⁴ Similarly, it was often the perception of the Game Laws and their operation that mattered more. In Miller’s tale of ‘The Poacher’ (1858) an otherwise honest man, John Burrows, is turned to it by the actions of a vindictive keeper who has him sent to jail for three months on a false accusation. The same keeper will later be killed by Burrows. Reversing the logic of the moral instructors, Burrows claims that ‘Had it not been for the Game Laws ... I should now have been an honest and industrious man ... nor would my children have had cause to be ashamed’.⁸⁵

But if Burrows feels the sting of his poaching, the reverse is the case for Dick Heron, the real poacher of Miller’s story. With the introduction of this character we have a clearly drawn contrast between the poacher by default and the poacher by intent and an interesting suggestion as to which is the more acceptable. Described as a ‘stout, athletic young man ... seldom without money’, Heron has a recognised status within the community and has ‘obtained the right to continue poacher’.⁸⁶ Openly professing his trade, Heron gives valuable, and honest, service to the local farmers and is a regular source of supply for the butcher. The former point allowed Miller to expound on the damage caused by game, while the latter aims a dart at the system’s underlying hypocrisy. Thus, if Burrows is painted as the victim of the story, it is Heron who comes

⁸² Thomas Miller, *The Poacher and Other Pictures of Country Life* (London, 1858), 40.

⁸³ John Belchem, ‘Radical Language, Meaning and Identity in the Age of the Chartists’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10 (2005), 3-4.

⁸⁴ Malcolm Chase, ‘Chartism and the Land: “The Mighty People’s Question”’, in Cragoe and Readman (eds), *Land Question*, 59.

⁸⁵ Miller, *The Poacher*, 25.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 11.

closest to being its hero and as such anticipates later representations of the poacher that laid greater stress on his skill and singularity.

Before writing 'The Poacher', Miller had worked on a rival version of G.W.M. Reynolds' hugely popular serial novel, *The Mysteries of London*, a sprawling narrative that included a number of attacks on the Game Laws.⁸⁷ The newspaper the Chartist supporting Reynolds launched in 1850 would consistently denounce those who 'have the poaching, the trespassing, and the vagrancy laws'.⁸⁸ For radicals like Reynolds, an obvious way to attack this state of 'feudalism' was through accounts of poaching affrays like that which occurred in 1851 at Rufford Abbey in Nottinghamshire. Resulting in a keeper's death, the incident also drew the attention of *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, a publication that specialised in dramatic accounts of violent crime. Within its highly coloured report of the scene, the paper also recorded how 'a strong feeling pervades the district in favour of the poachers'.⁸⁹ For *Reynolds' Newspaper* - a publication that combined the practices of 'the chap-book' with the political radicalism of the 'unstamped and the Chartist papers' - the blame rested firmly with the game-preserving Earl of Scarborough.⁹⁰ Under the banner of 'Poaching No Crime', it was claimed that

However much the death of a gamekeeper may be deplored, we confess that our sympathies, and we believe those of the majority of the people, rest with the poachers ... With a fair and full representation of the people, the game-laws would be amongst the first doomed to abolition; and then, the favourite occupation of imprisoning poachers would be lost to the county magistrates, we should not have to deplore those sanguinary struggles which are constantly resulting from the diabolical enforcement of oppressive laws.⁹¹

General dislike for the Game Laws notwithstanding, it should be stressed that representations of poaching affrays did not always take the side of the poacher.⁹²

Staying in 1851 we find Charles Dickens' *Household Words* reporting on separate

⁸⁷ G.W.M Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* (London, 1844-56). See the edition edited by Trefor Thomas (Manchester, 1996). Reynolds' wife also took on the Game Laws in her story from 1848, 'The Poacher's Daughter'. See Victor E. Neuberg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London, 1977), 163-64.

⁸⁸ Margaret Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago* (London, 1957), 35-36; *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 7th September 1851.

⁸⁹ *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 2nd November 1851.

⁹⁰ Virginia Berridge, 'Popular Sunday papers and mid-Victorian society' in George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Windgate (eds), *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (London, 1978), 247.

⁹¹ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 2nd November 1851. The affray was commemorated in the ballad 'Rufford Park Poachers'. See Palmer, *Sound of History*, 48-49.

⁹² See the *Era*, 1st December 1850; *Sunday Times*, 30th January 1859; *Illustrated London News* 20th November 1869.

events in Nottinghamshire where three keepers had bravely fought against forty poachers before succumbing to overwhelming force. Central to the story was the killing of Lion, a prize mastiff belonging to the keepers whose belly was cruelly ‘ripped open’ by one of the gang.⁹³ Pathos and a sense of human folly are also to be found in Charles Kingsley’s ‘Chartist novel’ *Yeast* in which an ageing keeper dies at the hands of a poaching gang from London.⁹⁴ However, flowing from the author’s unease at the Game Laws, we are also given the poem, ‘A Rough Rhyme on a Rough Matter’ in which ‘A poacher’s widow sat sighing / On the side of a white chalk bank’. Against this piteous image the sporting squire is roundly condemned: ‘There’s blood on the game you sell, squire, / And there’s blood on the game you eat.’⁹⁵ By the time that Macmillan issued a cheap edition of *Yeast* in the 1880s, ‘one of the bitterest social poems in the English language’ had acquired an active life of its own.⁹⁶ Given various musical settings and renamed ‘The Poacher’s Widow’ it was widely available as printed sheet music.⁹⁷ In this form it became especially associated with the composer and concert performer, Elizabeth Philp, and was a staple part of her repertoire. She also chose to include it in *How to Sing an English Ballad*, a publication aimed at female self-accompanists for use in home recitals.⁹⁸

Attacks on the Game Laws can also be found in the work of literary figures within the Chartist movement itself. Now regarded as one of the great ‘romantic populists’ of the nineteenth-century, Ernest Jones developed a clear line of attack against those who enjoyed the spoils of the ‘Norman robber’ and whose destruction of ancient liberties was the ‘parent-wound’.⁹⁹ In this context the poacher was made – both as creation of the ‘lawless’ law and as a powerful challenge to it. For example, in a story in the *Labourer* – a journal co-edited with Feargus O’Connor – we are introduced to the ‘jolly young

⁹³ Cate Ludlow (ed.), *Dickens’ Dreadful Almanac* (Stroud, 2010), 207.

⁹⁴ Charles Kingsley, *Yeast* (London, 1888, first publ. 1851). An earlier version of the novel was serialised by *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1848. See Brenda Collins, *Charles Kingsley: The Lion of Eversley* (London, 1975), ch. 6.

⁹⁵ Kingsley, *Yeast*, 147.

⁹⁶ Collins, *Kingsley*, 105.

⁹⁷ *The Poacher’s Widow*. Written by the Reverend Charles Kingsley, Composed by John Blockley (London, c. 1900). Another collection of Blockley compositions from c.1860 also references the song.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Philp, *How to Sing an English Ballad* (London, 1883).

⁹⁹ Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones, Chartism and the Romance of Politics* (Oxford, 2003), preface; Ernest Jones, *Evenings with the People. The Hereditary Landed Aristocracy* (London, 1856), 4. For another Chartist writer on poachers see Thomas Frost, *Paul the Poacher* (London, 1848). Exemplifying the interconnectedness of nineteenth century culture, a play of this title had already been written. See E.W. Elton, *Paul the Poacher* (London, 1836).

poacher', Dick Rattles. Taken into service by the local squire, Dick soon becomes a subversive figure below stairs regaling his fellows with a song of his own making. Part celebratory in the manner of 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', but also drawing heavily on the politics of the day, the penultimate verse runs:

When the squire stole acres my dad took his rods, / and fenced them around as his
lawful domain / Sure it never was meant by the law of the Gods, / That the Parson and
Squire should eat all the game.¹⁰⁰

Whether or not it was Jones who wrote these words we cannot know, but certainly more typical of his poetic output was 'Leawood Hall'. First appearing in 1855 it was later included in a printed memorial to his life and work.¹⁰¹ Faced with the cries of his starving family at Christmas-time, the unnamed hero of the poem takes to the woods of Leawood Hall – a place which dates from the time of the Normans. There he poaches a deer but in the process is discovered and in the ensuing struggle sustains his own fatal wound. Making it home, the poacher is able to provide his family with a seasonal feast before dying in the arms of his loving wife. And as another Game Law tragedy plays to its bloody conclusion: 'Still in Leawood laughter loud / sped the dance athwart the floor; / *That* was Christmas for the proud / *This* was Christmas for the poor.'¹⁰²

Come the renewed focus on land politics in the 1870s, the emotionally rich language offered by those like Jones could be usefully recycled by organisations that made a clear connection between the current state of land ownership and the operation of the Game Laws. Along with Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourer's Union, we might also note the Anti-Game Law League, the Labour Representation League, and the Manchester-based National Reform Union. In line with these other organisations the middle-class NRU pledged to seek reform of the Game Laws as part of its revised constitution of 1875 and produced a printed copy of 'The Poacher's Widow' addressed to the working people of Britain.¹⁰³ Kingsley's words had by now acquired the status of an unofficial anthem for such groups and would often be sung at meetings or at gatherings in radical clubs.¹⁰⁴ The key verse referring to 'blood on the game' was also

¹⁰⁰ 'The Jolly Young Poacher', *Labourer*, (London, 1847), 77.

¹⁰¹ Ernest Jones, 'Leawood Hall' in *In Memoriam: Ernest Jones* (Manchester, 1879).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰³ Margot Finn, *After Chartism: Class and nation in English radical politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), 309. 'The Poacher's Widow', Manchester Central Library (Special Collections), National Reform Union Pamphlets.

¹⁰⁴ Antony Taylor, *Lords of Misrule: Hostility to Aristocracy in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2004), fn. 83, 195.

quoted by the AGLL its 1880 address to the ‘Constituencies of the United Kingdom’.¹⁰⁵ Led by the serially dissenting Liberal MP for Leicester, Peter Taylor, the AGLL was often accused of indulging the poacher. However, although running a celebrity-style interview with the ‘King of the Poachers’ (the now ‘retired’ Frederick Gowing), the organisation focused more on the idea of the poacher as a victim.¹⁰⁶ ‘Anti-Game Law Rhymes’, like the one in which ‘Young Fustian’ is beaten to death by ‘Lord Velvet’s’ keeper, ‘Old Bully’, were a typical offering.¹⁰⁷ Within this clearly defined, if unequal, struggle, the Staffordshire figurine showing the real-life murder of a keeper by a poacher in 1866 is of considerable interest [Fig. 1.3].

Eminently collectable today, these colourful ornaments form part of the vast array of ‘extant material culture’ that was part-and-parcel of a vibrant nineteenth-century market in domestic consumerism.¹⁰⁸ In addition to their attractive visual qualities, Rohan McWilliam claims that in their ‘conjunction of narrative and portraiture’ such objects provided an important means of ‘identity construction.’¹⁰⁹ Suggestively here, an 1874 figurine of the Tichborne Claimant is shown as a country gentleman out for a day’s sport. However, denied his claim to the baronetcy, it is not pheasants he has been shooting but pigeons. ‘Poaching’ on the grounds of the aristocracy, the Claimant’s ill-fated journey through the law courts could be taken as analogous to the deep-seated injustices of the Game Laws.¹¹⁰ Made by the same manufacturer as produced Tichborne, the figurine showing Collier and Smith is unusual for such objects in that it actually shows the moment of killing. Although murder was a common enough subject, the act itself was usually left unseen.¹¹¹ In this way, the death of Smith - defending a world that Tichborne and his like will always be excluded from - could be read as further marking the tragic amounts of blood on the game (note the dead pheasants on the ground). However, it is also possible to see a heightened moment in the conflict over

¹⁰⁵ *The Game Laws. Address of the Anti-Game Law League to the Constituencies of the United Kingdom* (January, 1880), 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Anti-Game Law Circular*, 26th April, 1873; 10th May 1873.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 31st August 1872. A graphic description of a young poacher being beaten to death by gamekeepers was also provided by Howard Evans in *From Serfdom to Manhood: A Story of Agricultural Life* (London, 1875), 67-68.

¹⁰⁸ Jim Cheshire, ‘Material Culture and the “Backstage”’: A Response to Peter K. Andersson’s ‘How Civilised Were the Victorians?’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 22, 2017, 76.

¹⁰⁹ Rohan McWilliam, ‘The Theatricality of the Staffordshire Figurine’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10 (2005), 109-12.

¹¹⁰ Rohan McWilliam, *The Tichborne Claimant: A Victorian Sensation* (London, 2007), 221-29.

¹¹¹ P.D. Gordon Pugh, *Staffordshire Portrait Figures* (Woodbridge, 1987), 65, 85; Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 96.

the laws attaching to game in which Collier - a tenant farmer with a large family to support - is locked into a mortal, but defensible, struggle with the game-keeping son of a neighbouring landowner. Both the agent and the symbol of the Game Laws, the keeper would seek to deny the poacher's liberty just for the sake of some birds. Or perhaps it simply demonstrates an abiding interest of the period in crimes of violence, of which the poaching affray had become a steady supplier. What is not in doubt is the extent to which the leading protagonists of these 'rough melodramas' had become part of the interior world of Victorian England.



1.3 'The Murder of Thomas Smith by Richard Collier', 1866. Image courtesy of the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent. Collier is on the right. Smith, armed with a revolver and accompanied by a dog, is on the left. According to the evidence at the trial, Smith had neither a revolver or a dog and was shot and then bludgeoned to death by Collier. The scene is therefore tilted towards the poacher. See Appendix 3 for another version.

Realisations: painted and theatrical representations of the poacher

Further adding to the visuality of poacher representations was the production, and re-production, of sporting art and rural genre scenes. It must be borne in mind, however, that while a growing variety of printing techniques allowed for a broadening of circulation and audience, something also achieved through the development of public

art galleries, painterly representations of the poacher, like rustic scenes in general, were essentially by, and for, the urban middle-classes.¹¹² In turn this affected both content and form as images of poaching needed to be reconciled to a view of the countryside as a place of honest toil. But if not having the anti-authoritarian sympathy for poachers which the more plebeian ballads tended to display, the narrative impulse was similarly towards the melodramatic and the idea of the poacher as an unfortunate victim was not lost sight of. As Christiana Payne has put it in her study of the agricultural landscape in nineteenth-century English painting:

Poaching, with its potentially dramatic consequences ... was a fairly popular subject for artists in this period, who sometimes used the poacher as a contrast to the industrious and contented worker, but also showed some sympathy for poachers as victims of unjust laws.¹¹³

This latter point is clearly illustrated in the print below [Fig. 1.4].

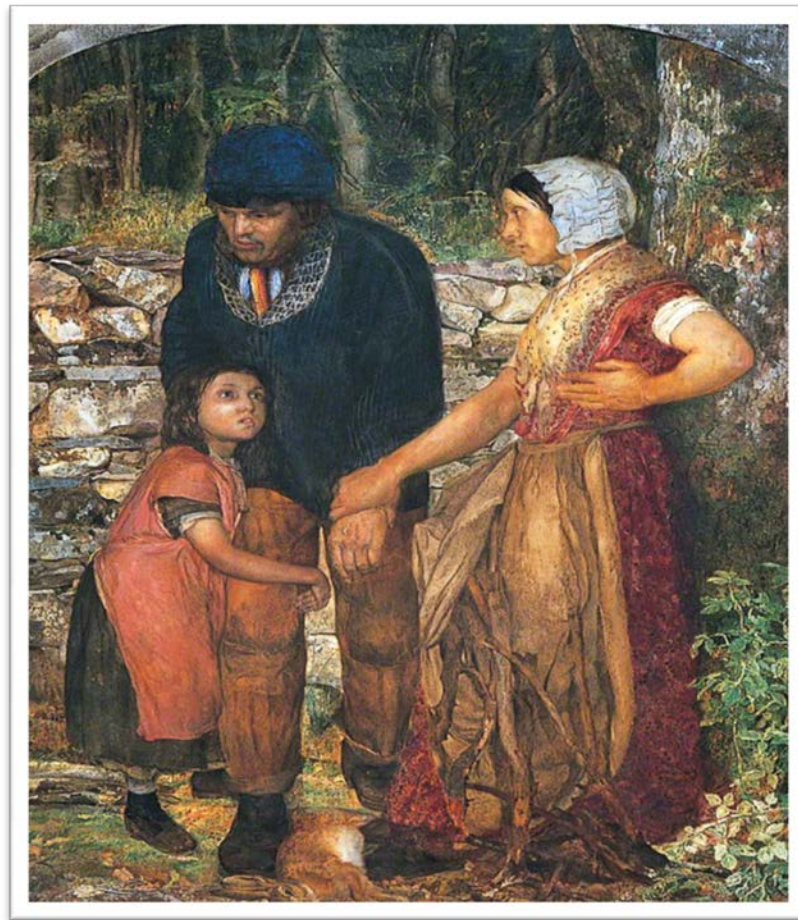


1.4 *Poacher Detected*. Thomas Lupton after William Kidd, London, 1831. Courtesy of the British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

¹¹² Giles Waterfield, *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain, 1800-1914* (New Haven, 2015), 1-6.

¹¹³ Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (New Haven, 1993), 9-10.

If morally in step with other pictorial representations of poaching from around this time - it is theft and it will be found out - the labourer is as much an object for pity as for censure.¹¹⁴ Given that the key witness against him is a keeper, the extent to which justice will be fairly administered by the comfortably seated squire is open to question. Indeed, prior to the Summary Jurisdiction Act of 1848, it was possible to hear the most common Game Law cases in private. Moving deeper into the period, an 1858 painting called *The Wife's Remonstrance* by the Pre-Raphaelite artist James Campbell, contains a similar ambiguity [Fig. 1.5].



1.5 *The Wife's Remonstrance*, James Campbell, 1858. Image courtesy of Birmingham City Art Gallery.

On the one hand the wife is right to intercede and the rabbit should be left on the ground. However, making the 'correct' moral decision will clearly involve hardship for the whole family and perhaps the poached rabbit is justified. In this painting, as in

¹¹⁴ Charles Turner's series of eight 'progress' prints from 1826 moves through the setting of the first snare to imprisonment and eventual pardon. Charles Turner, *The Poachers Progress*, (Edinburgh, 1981, first publ. 1826).

Figure 1.4, the poacher is not at all a threatening figure – or a particularly interesting one. Indeed, suggests Payne, in many of these representations there is the clear implication that ‘the poacher is a weak character’.¹¹⁵ Within such carefully visualised melodramas, the relationship between the poacher and his wife and / or daughter would be a common theme, with familial relationships being as much the subject of the picture as the issue of poaching itself (see Chapter Three).¹¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the more dangerous aspects of poaching would also prove attractive for artists and image-makers of these years. Although given his Scottish context he is outside the realms of this study, Sir Edwin Landseer enjoyed much success in England with his dramatic accounts of poaching in the Highlands.¹¹⁷ Very much in the Landseer school of graphic realism we have Richard Ansdell’s *The Poacher at Bay*. Showing a powerful mastiff getting the better of a poacher and his own animal, the picture sparked considerable interest when exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865. In the admiring words of the *Era*, ‘The man’s features, the hound’s courageous grandeur, the cur’s devotion, unavailing as it may be ... are all painted with a truth and effect which have never been exceeded.’¹¹⁸ As this comment suggests, another attraction of the poaching subject for artists was that it allowed for the painting of animals – especially dogs. We can see this very clearly in the work of Briton Riviere, an artist who enjoyed an early success at the Royal Academy in 1866 with *The Poacher’s Nurse* in which a ‘faithful lurcher’ tends to its sick master by licking his hand.¹¹⁹

In a career which reportedly gave ‘much pleasure to the majority of his countrymen’, Riviere would return to the subject of poaching on at least four other occasions.¹²⁰ Starting with *Prisoners* (1869), we see the artist reworking the theme of the canine helpmate [Fig. 1.6]. With pictures like this, the commercially-minded Riviere was both reflecting and shaping society’s growing attachment to its dogs in which their qualities of loyalty and self-sacrifice would be frequently documented.¹²¹ To an extent that is

¹¹⁵ Christiana Payne, ‘Smugglers, Poachers and Wreckers’, 166.

¹¹⁶ And see *The Poacher’s Home* (Thomas Wade, 1868), and *Woman Interceding for the Vanquished* (Thomas Jones Barker, 1871).

¹¹⁷ F.G. Stephens, *Memoirs of Sir Edwin Landseer* (London, 1874), 152.

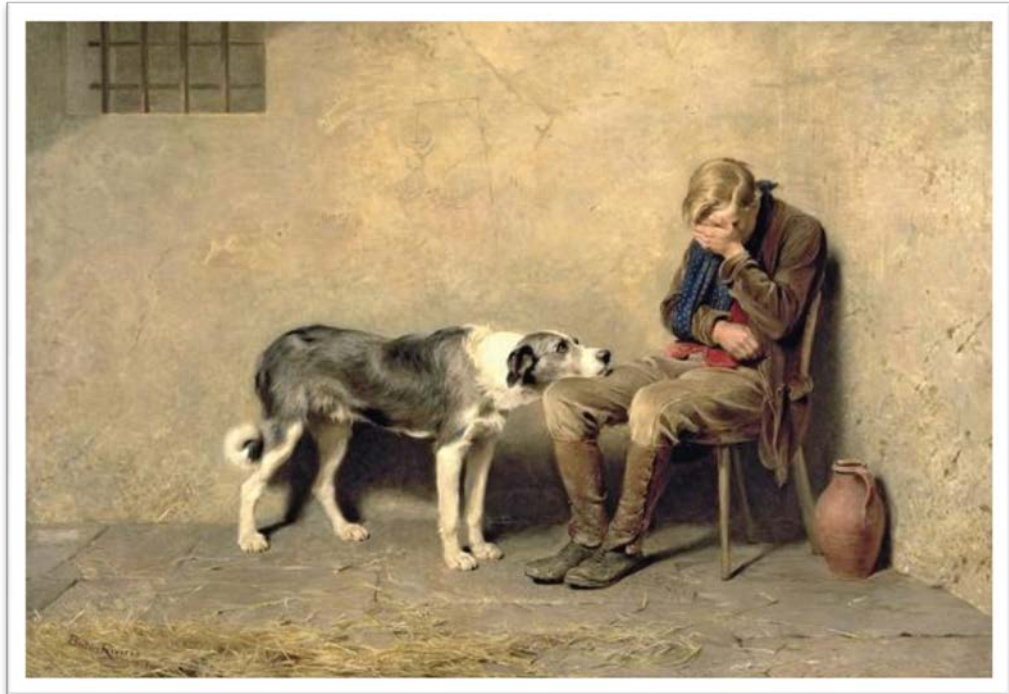
¹¹⁸ *Era*, 7th May 1865.

¹¹⁹ Harry How, ‘Briton Riviere’, *Strand Magazine*, January 1896, 7.

¹²⁰ Briton Riviere, obituary, *Manchester Guardian*, 21st April 1920.

¹²¹ Hilda Kean, *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (London, 1998), 79-88.

important to emphasise, the poacher's enviably close relationship with his dog would become a well-established, and largely affirming, motif in poacher representations.



1.6 *The Prisoners*, Briton Riviere, 1869. Courtesy of Lady Lever Art Gallery, National Museums, Liverpool. The painting was later retitled *Fidelity*.

The moral of the above painting seems fairly clear-cut: poaching should be avoided because it is physically dangerous and likely to have serious, and possibly shameful, consequences. Posed in a suitably melodramatic way, the young poacher suffers the pain of his humiliation as well as his wound – a sense which his dog seems to share. At the same time, however, his youthful comeliness, together with the heart-warming loyalty of his companion, tempers any anti-poacher sermonising that the image might otherwise contain. A similar effect is created by *Companions in Misfortune* (1883) in which another young poacher lies wounded in the woods with only his dog in watchful attendance.¹²² Also featuring the obligatory dog, 'The Poacher' offers something of a contrast in that we now have a more experienced man going stealthily about his business of taking game [Fig. 1.7].

¹²² Briton Riviere, *Companions in Misfortune* (1883). Held by the Tate.



1.7 *The Poacher*, Briton Riviere, 1876. Image via WikiGallery.

Shown successfully at the Dudley Gallery in London, the description later provided by the *Strand* captures the scene well:

The poacher, at whose side are a number of dead rabbits and his gun, has just heard approaching footsteps. He has crept behind the trunk of a tree, and is holding up a warning finger to his dog not to budge and inch, or to utter a sound which would betray him.¹²³

Left in suspense, the viewer is inclined towards the poacher whose professionalism and experience are strongly emphasised. Also, by focusing more on the craft aspects of poaching, Riviere is partly anticipating the writings of Richard Jefferies (see below). Ironically, though, Riviere's best-known work on a poaching theme included neither poachers or dogs. The painting in question was 'The Poacher's Widow', a visualisation of Kingsley's poem-turned-popular song. Given its subject matter, and the artist's own reputation, it received widespread coverage from the press when shown at the Royal Academy in 1879 and reveals the degree to which the 'stirring lines' of the 'Chartist Parson' had entered the public consciousness.¹²⁴ However, powerful words do not necessarily make for arresting imagery, and the painting was largely judged a failure. 'There is sorrow in the widow's face, but none of the brooding spirit of revenge which is shadowed forth in the poem', concluded the *Spectator's* review on the piece.¹²⁵ It is

¹²³ How, 'Riviere', 10. The painting was reproduced as an engraving. *Graphic*, 24th January 1885.

¹²⁴ *Tablet*, 24th May 1879.

¹²⁵ *Spectator*, 3rd May 1879.

to sorrow and revenge, two of the staple ingredients of the staged melodramas of the period, that we must now turn.

Following the work of Martin Meisel on the visualisation of narrative in Victorian popular culture, it will be seen that there was often a close relationship between the world of the poacher created by the artist and that shown by the makers of drama.¹²⁶ Before considering the ways in which the poacher was absorbed into the representational practices of the stage, it needs to be emphasised just how popular the theatre was at this time. Driven by many of the same forces behind the expanding market in print culture, the theatre was also in the process of constructing a diverse audience with a host of dramatic entertainments and experiences on offer.¹²⁷ Moving beyond London, the Victorian theatre was an equally vibrant presence in the provinces with companies either making or reviving their own productions or adapting and importing works previously staged elsewhere. We should also note the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 which ended the privileged position of the officially sanctioned ‘majors’ that for over a century had reserved to them the right to stage so-called ‘legitimate’ or spoken-word drama. Partly as a consequence of this, between 1850 and the end of the century the number of legitimate theatres trebled in London and increased fourfold in the provinces.¹²⁸ In short, suggests John Russell Stephens, the Victorian theatre was ‘the closest of all art forms to the mass of the public.’¹²⁹

By the time the above measure was implemented, the most popular style of dramatic entertainment with audiences was that which had evolved to allow the ‘minor’ theatres to circumvent the previous restrictions – the melodrama. Within the overarching appeal of this highly adaptable form, the most successful sub-genre was the so-called ‘domestic drama’ in which the storylines were rooted in the concerns of modern life and in the desire for ‘proper’ order and ‘right’ to prevail. According to David Mayer’s analysis, within settings and situations that audiences could accept as being realistic, these dramas represented a theatrical response to ‘a world where things are seen to go wrong’ and which in turn ‘frequently explored the major fault-line of class and status and the

¹²⁶ Martin Meisel, *Realisations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1993).

¹²⁷ On the variety of Victorian audiences see Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Iowa, 2001).

¹²⁸ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 1.

¹²⁹ John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama, 1824-1901* (Cambridge, 1980), 2.

anxieties which these subjects engendered.’ In this way, continues Mayer, domestic melodrama was ‘an essential social and cultural instrument’, quite apart from being a major source of entertainment [Fig. 1.8].¹³⁰



1.8 The ‘rough melodrama’ of the poaching affray. Playbill advertising *The Poacher's Fate* at the Bower Theatre, Lambeth, June 1867. Note the title of the piece it is paired with. Image courtesy of the University of Kent (Special Collections),

¹³⁰ David Mayer, ‘Encountering Melodrama’ in Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge, 2004), 145-47.

Often set in the countryside - in part because stock locations like cottage, farm and hall provided clear delineations of space and status - poachers and the Game Laws featured frequently in these dramas. However, as with the representations we have already considered, there tends to be little about the act of poaching itself or what skills and qualities a successful poacher might be expected to have. The poacher of this world is essentially an anti-presence, a symbol and carrier of grievance – specifically against the Game Laws, but more generally against a society unfairly balanced between those with land and wealth and those without. Reviewing George Conquest's *Crime and Repentance* (1864), the *Era* noted how the 'interest is partly domestic and partly of that stronger kind incidental to poaching life' and that the 'allusions to the game laws were received with hearty applause.'¹³¹ Here, the secondary role of the poacher, Will Snare, is defined largely in terms of his actions against the 'brutally authoritative' and 'hated' head keeper.¹³² If the poacher of these anti-Game Law dramas represented a 'new type of hero', he was one of an essentially negative kind.¹³³

The poacher's other major function was to assist the plot through the making of 'good' or 'bad' interventions. The former action is often not what the poacher originally intended and in this respect we return to the ambivalent feelings the poacher could stir up. Dislike for the Game Laws did not always translate into unqualified support or sympathy for the poacher. Indeed, in both nomenclature and appearance, the poacher was presentable as one of melodrama's most backhandedly popular characters – the so-called 'black' villain.¹³⁴ Writing in 1913 the novelist and editor, Max Pemberton, claimed how the villainous stage poacher had proved of great use to Victorian dramatists who 'when a rural murder was to be committed' readily chose 'this desperado of the woods.'¹³⁵ If a bad system could produce and sustain wicked men like Jonas Hundle (see below), it could also make desperate and violent ones out of others. In John Walker's bleak 1832 drama, *The Factory Lad*, the poaching Will Rushton is eventually driven to incendiarism and murder.¹³⁶ Either way, the poacher developed as

¹³¹ *Era*, 19th June, 1864.

¹³² *Ibid.*

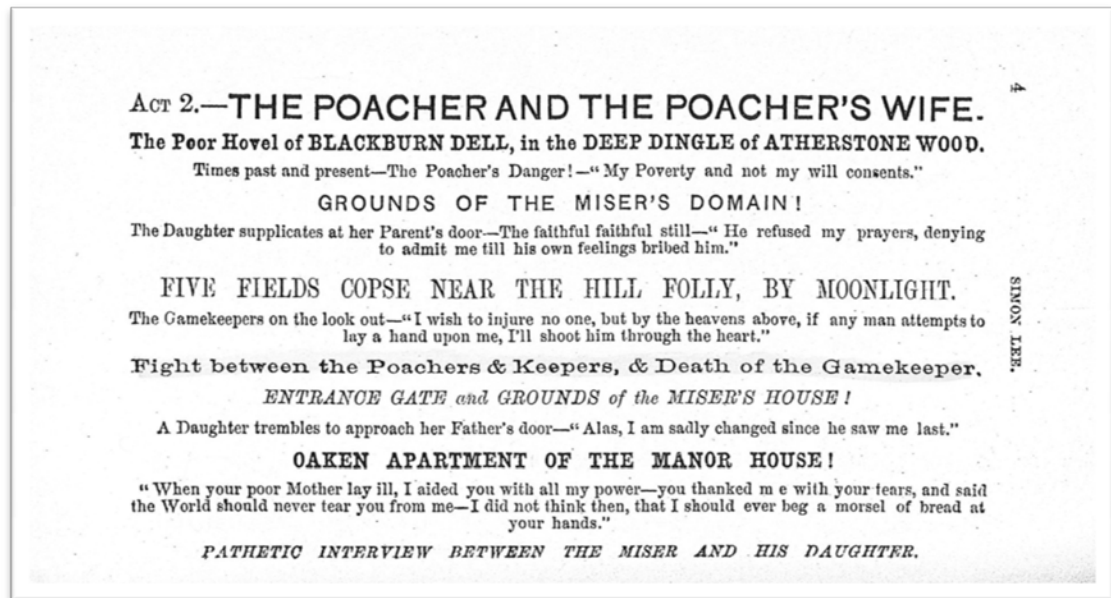
¹³³ Cross, *Next Week*, 183.

¹³⁴ Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London, 1965), 18-20.

¹³⁵ Max Pemberton, *Game and the Land: Tyranny in the Villages* (London, 1913), 9.

¹³⁶ John Walker, *The Factory Lad*, in Michael R. Booth (ed.), *The Magistrate and Other Nineteenth-Century Plays* (Oxford, 1974). And see Robin Estill, 'The Factory Lad: Melodrama as Propaganda', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1, 1971, 22-6.

an important presence on the nineteenth-century stage – a point that can best be made through charting some popular productions of the period, starting with *Simon Lee; or, The Murder of the Five Fields Copse* [Fig. 1.9].



1.9 Outline of Act II from the Lacy acting edition of *Simon Lee* c.1850s. Through publishers like Lacy, Duncombe and Dicks, game-law melodramas had a significant afterlife.

Written by George Diddin Pitt, the play had its first performances in the spring of 1839. As a former actor and stage manager, Pitt's guiding principle was that the drama was 'consonant with scenes of real life'.¹³⁷ Coming in the same year as the first Chartist petition and the Newport Rising, the chief interest of the play is in Lee's killing of a gamekeeper in self-defence, an action that brings the sentence of death. If only becoming a poacher through circumstance, Lee finds nothing wrong in the act itself. For the ruined farmer, 'the laws of man' are not those of nature and the 'wild inhabitants of the forest and the field, were intended for the subsistence of man and the property of all'.¹³⁸ Reprieved at the last minute, the news arrives too late for the poacher's despairing wife who in the meantime has committed suicide. With the action symbolically played out in Warwickshire, the 'heart of old England', the failure to avert such a disaster was an unusual touch and added significantly to this particular critique of the Game Laws.

¹³⁷ Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (Harmondsworth, 1974) 114; Simon Trussler, 'A Chronology of Early Melodrama', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1 (1971), 21.

¹³⁸ George Diddin Pitt, *Simon Lee; or, The Murder of the Five Fields Copse* (Dick's Standard Plays, London, c.1888), 9. An edition of the play was also produced by Lacy.

Dibdin Pitt returned to the subject of poaching in the following decade with his expeditious re-working of the recent novel by Charlton Carew, *The Poacher's Wife: A Story of the Times* (1847).¹³⁹ If not to everyone's taste, one reviewer considered it 'claptrap', the book was generally deemed a success and thought likely to 'meet the state of the market.'¹⁴⁰ Dibdin Pitt's slightly renamed adaptation was first performed in May of the same year at the Britannia in Hoxton, reportedly 'the most valuable piece of theatre real-estate in England' and well-known for its staging of Shakespeare.¹⁴¹ In other words, the travails of the poacher and his family - in this case triggered by the actions of a jealous gamekeeper - were expected to command an audience. Also drawing on pre-existing material, and very much written for the market, we have Edward Fitzball's *The Momentous Question*. Originally produced for the Lyceum in 1844, according to the author's later account the play was 'acted everywhere, and is everywhere a favourite.'¹⁴²

Over a long and successful career, Fitzball displayed a keen interest in the commercial possibilities of theatrical 'realisation'. The play under consideration is a good example of this, drawing as it does on Crabbe's well-known narrative poem, 'Smugglers and Poachers', and a popular engraving of a scene from it called *The Momentous Question*. The print itself was a re-production from a painting of the same name by Sarah Setchel (1842). When viewed in the context of Crabbe's poem, we see the heroine, Rachel, visiting her true love, Robert, who has just been imprisoned for his part in a poaching affray. The key witness to Robert's crime is his estranged brother, James, gamekeeper to the local squire and also in love with Rachel. Although subject to a number of alterations from the original source (the brothers now become boyhood friends and only Robert is killed), Fitzball effectively had a pre-packaged play, on a well-established theme, with a clear opportunity for staging a then fashionable *tableaux vivant*.

¹³⁹ Charlton Carew, *The Poacher's Wife: a Story of the Times* (London, 1847).

¹⁴⁰ *Critic*, 3rd April 1847. For a more positive review see the *Mirror of Literature*, 1st March 1847.

¹⁴¹ *Era*, 17th May 1847, 23rd May 1847. Clive Barker, 'A Theatre for the People' in Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson (eds), *Essays on Nineteenth Century British Theatre* (London, 1971), 23. George Dibdin Pitt, *The Poacher's Wife; or, Pride and Poverty* (Lord Chamberlain's Papers, Add. MS 43, 003). Within a week of the Britannia opening, the Royal Albert Saloon was staging an alternate version of the Carew novel, *The Poachers Wife: A Story of the Times* by Samuel Atkyns (LCP, Add. MS 43, 003).

¹⁴² Edward Fitzball, *Thirty-Five Years of a Dramatic Author's Life* (London, 1859), 229. An acting edition of the play was published in the 1850s by Duncombe, with Lacy and Dicks following later.

Aside from demonstrating how representations of the poaching theme had become part of the ‘inter-connectedness’ of Victorian culture - the point of such ‘realisations’ was that the audience would recognise the pictorial reference - *The Momentous Question* is of interest because in the character of Robert we have a more vigorous and committed poacher than is usual for the period. Unlike Simon Lee, Robert has not been forced into poaching, and removed from the present day (the play is set in 1790) there is no need to fit poaching into current issues or concerns. In this sense Robert is left free to be a poacher if he so chooses, and it is the ‘freedom’ contained within making this choice that is central to his actions. Capable of voicing the usual arguments about the right to hunt animals, what really drives Robert is a refusal to serve others or to be placed within a hierarchy not of his making. Chiding Rachel for her decision to go into service he insists how ‘you’ll find it somewhat hard and degrading to obey the tinkling of a bell’. In a similar vein, by choosing to become a keeper his erstwhile best-friend, James, has effectively betrayed his kind.¹⁴³ If Robert’s violent death at the head of a band of smugglers clears the way for the dutiful keeper to marry Rachel, it is the non-conforming Robert who remains her true love.

Regarding the more obviously villainous stage-poacher, we can return to Jonas Hundle in Colin Hazlewood’s *Waiting for the Verdict* (1859).¹⁴⁴ Always sensitive to audience demand, the prolific writer’s poaching-themed melodrama also incorporated a *tableaux vivant*.¹⁴⁵ It also made Hundle the driver of the action through the tracing of his various dark deeds. In fact, the alternative title for the play was *The Dark Deed in the Woods* – a reference to the cold-blooded murder he puts on to the struggling young farmer, Jasper Roseblade. Yet the murderous Hundle is not beyond redemption, and fatally wounded he confesses to his crime. If ultimately given a happy ending, Meisel notes how throughout the play the ‘factor of social resentments is prominent’ and ‘most of the good lines are directed against the rich.’¹⁴⁶ Twenty years later audiences were still

¹⁴³ Edward Fitzball, *The Momentous Question* (Duncombe edition, London, c.1852), 7-8.

¹⁴⁴ Colin H. Hazlewood, *Waiting for the Verdict* (Lacy’s Acting Edition, London, 1874). On this occasion the painting to be ‘realised’ on stage was Abraham Solomon’s 1857 work of the same title.

¹⁴⁵ On Hazlewood’s career see Janice Norwood, ‘The Britannia Theatre: Visual Culture and Repertoire’ in Anselm Heinrich, Katherine Newey and Jeffrey Richards (eds), *Ruskin, the Theatre and Victorian Visual Culture* (Basingstoke, 2009), 135-53.

¹⁴⁶ Meisel, *Realisations*, 297.

enjoying this ‘old sensational play’ in which ‘the poacher Hundle ... is very warmly received.’¹⁴⁷

Hundle’s divided nature - he is a poacher but also a paid watcher of game, a villain who does the right thing - brings us to a characterisation that was common at the time – that of the poacher as a liminal presence, marginal from the main story but with the potential to make decisive interventions. Making play with the poacher’s habit of well-concealed watchfulness, dramatists had a ready source of plot advancement and resolution. In Fitzball’s later drama, *The Crock of Gold* (1847), a poacher uses information gained while ‘pursuing his lawless avocation’ to save a poor labourer and his family from the cruel intentions of the steward from a local estate.¹⁴⁸ However, of much greater significance, because so widely seen, were the actions of Otway Bethel in T.A. Palmer’s 1874 adaptation of the hugely successful novel, *East Lynne*. From his vantage point in the woods, Bethel witnesses the murder by the caddish Captain Levinson of an old man whose daughter he is trying to seduce. Accepting a bribe for his silence the poacher disappears from the scene and Levinson is allowed to continue his destructive career at the expense of Richard Hare, the man framed for the killing. Although only a subplot to the main drama, Bethel will be instrumental in clearing Hare’s name as he returns to denounce Levinson. As the poacher-witness explains:

I left England the day after the murder, little thinking that an innocent man might be accused of the crime which you had committed; but hearing that poor Dick Hare had been allowed by you to lie under this terrible accusation, I hastened to make a tardy reparation by telling all I knew.¹⁴⁹

Called a scoundrel by the discredited Levinson, Bethel replies simply: ‘I should have been had I not spoken the truth, and so put justice on the track of one who is a scoundrel and a coward.’¹⁵⁰ So says the honourable poacher to the crooked baronet. We shall return to Otway Bethel in Chapter Four.

¹⁴⁷ *Era*, 5th September 1880.

¹⁴⁸ *Sunday Times*, 18th November 1847.

¹⁴⁹ T.A. Palmer, *East Lynne* (French’s Acting Edition, London, nd.).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The 'word paintings' of Richard Jefferies

Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) is a key figure in the history of writing on the English countryside. In conveying the rural world to an increasingly urban one, no previous author, claims W.J. Keith, 'combined the detailed knowledge and experience with the requisite literary instinct and ability to present the essence of the country in words'.¹⁵¹ For Karen Sayer, Jefferies did nothing less than establish 'the dominant descriptive mode of writing' on the late Victorian countryside.¹⁵² Beyond this wider literary influence, he also played a major role in shaping the ways the poacher was thought about and represented. The nature and workings of the laws surrounding game now become less important than the nature and workings of the poacher himself. With Jefferies the poacher began the journey away from Game Law melodrama towards becoming a more fully realised presence in the national culture – to be found as readily in the library of a country house as on the bookshelves of a newly built suburban villa.

Writing for a largely non-rural audience, Jefferies was mindful of the interests and outlook of his prospective readership. In this he was helped by his years spent as a journalist, but also by the fact that the author was himself now living on the outer fringes of London in Surbiton. Separated in time and space from that which he wrote of, yet drawing on his memories as the son of a small Wiltshire farmer, Jefferies was ideally equipped to project a clear-eyed, but lyrical, version of the English countryside. Commonly placed in the tradition of Gilbert White, and a key influence on Edward Thomas, Jefferies' remarkable quintet of countryside books that began with *The Gamekeeper at Home* (1878) drew a wide and admiring audience.¹⁵³ As Thomas concluded in his 1909 biography:

no one English writer before had had such a wide knowledge of labourers, farmers, gamekeepers, poachers, of the fields, and woods, and waters, and the sky above them, by day and night; of their inhabitants that run and fly and creep ... When he wrote these books - *The Amateur Poacher* and its companions - he had no rival, nor have they since been equalled in purity, abundance, and rusticity.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ W.J. Keith, *Richard Jefferies: A Critical Study* (Toronto, 1965), 59.

¹⁵² Sayer, *Women*, 149.

¹⁵³ Between 1878 and 1880 Jefferies published five books on the Wiltshire countryside. Together these constituted his most popular works and were all pre-serialised in the press.

¹⁵⁴ Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* (London, 1978), 291-2.

Well-versed in the technicalities of shooting, keeping and poaching, Jefferies' minutely detailed 'word paintings' gave access to a world usually reserved to readers of the *Field*, or confined to the pages of manuals on game preserving.¹⁵⁵ In this way his writings shaped a growing interest in country sports and lifestyles which itself formed part of the emergent ruralist culture that will be considered more fully in Chapter Three.¹⁵⁶ According to one of the many favourable reviews of *The Gamekeeper at Home*, the book would not only 'prove of value to country gentlemen solicitous for the preservation of their game' but

will interest a far wider class. The denizens of our huge overgrown cities and manufacturing towns will probably enjoy this volume even more than those who live in the country and can test the value of the writer's observations and suggestions. To the residents in cities it will possess the great charm of novelty in the information which it supplies.¹⁵⁷

Significantly here, *The Gamekeeper at Home* was the first of Jefferies' books to enjoy the backing of an established publisher. Impressed by his series of articles on gamekeeping in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Smith, Elder, and Co. approached the author with a proposal to adapt these into a book. Advertised to the trade as 'Sketches of Natural History, Poaching and Rural Life' (not, one notes, of gamekeeping), the book was well received and by the time that an illustrated edition was published in December 1879 it had gone through several impressions.¹⁵⁸ By this point *The Amateur Poacher* had also been published (as had *Wild Life in a Southern Country*). As with the earlier books, *The Amateur Poacher* had previously appeared in serial form in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and was equally enjoyed by its readers. Indeed, according to the *Saturday Review*, 'This third volume of a very agreeable series is perhaps in some respects more enjoyable than its predecessors' and '[we] can only advise all lovers of the country to get *The Amateur Poacher* and read it for themselves.'¹⁵⁹

Although in Walter Besant's evocative phrase, Jefferies 'made his way to the fields through the farmers first', like many of his background the 'countryside conservative'

¹⁵⁵ James Purves, 'Poachers and Poaching', *Contemporary Review*, September 1883, 350.

¹⁵⁶ Keith, *Rural Tradition*, 131.

¹⁵⁷ *John Bull*, 27th August 1878. Jefferies kept a substantial folder of cuttings concerning reviews of this book. See BL, Jefferies' Collection, vol. xxiii: 58825.

¹⁵⁸ Hugoe Matthews and Phyllis Treitel, *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies: A chronological study* (Boars Hill, 1994), 103.

¹⁵⁹ *Saturday Review*, 1st November, 1879. A second edition appeared in 1881. Further editions appeared in 1889 and 1896.

Jefferies was drawn to illegitimate as well as legitimate sport.¹⁶⁰ Certainly we get a flavour of this in the opening section of *The Amateur Poacher* which begins by recounting the author's poaching experiences in the company of his younger brother. At the same time, however, Jefferies also befriended Benny Haylock, the redoubtable head keeper at the nearby estate of Burderop Park, and who as 'the custodian of the woods and covers' forms the central figure in *The Gamekeeper at Home*.¹⁶¹ Given the low regard in which gamekeepers were generally held, the portrait offered by Jefferies was an unusually sympathetic one. Indeed, in a rare moment of criticism, Thomas attacked *The Gamekeeper at Home* for being too close to its subject – 'For the time being his attitude towards life is that of the gamekeeper ... having to write about the gamekeeper he becomes one.'¹⁶² Far more appealing to Thomas, and one suspects many other readers, were the poachers against which Haylock and his brother keepers were ranged. 'If it were not for the poacher's own wit and knowledge that come out in half of the best passages', continued Thomas, 'the reader might be excused for disgust with such a policeman god as the book invokes.'¹⁶³

Appearing so close together, and covering essentially the same ground, it is tempting to see *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *The Amateur Poacher* as a complementary pairing – the former (via Haylock) putting the case for the keeper, the latter (via Oby) that for the poacher. However, although in *The Gamekeeper at Home* the poacher is denied a voice of his own, the final third of the book is largely given over to a detailed, and often admiring, description of his various working methods. Charles Whymper's illustrations would add much to this general impression [Figs. 1.10 & 1.11]. Reading through Jefferies' collection of press cuttings on the book, one is quickly struck by the volume of comment reserved for the material on poaching.¹⁶⁴ Although publications like the *Sporting Gazette* chose to focus on its more criminal and violent aspects, the overall tone is one of fascination, and pleasure, at having a largely secretive world brought so expertly in to view. Significantly here game *is* regarded as property, but if taken with 'art' it does not appear to be theft.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London, 1893), 109; *Times Literary Supplement*, 23rd December 2016, 12.

¹⁶¹ Richard Jefferies, *The Gamekeeper at Home* (London, 1910, first publ. 1878), vii.

¹⁶² Thomas, *Richard Jefferies*, 117.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ See BL, Jefferies' Collection, vol. xxiii: 58825.

¹⁶⁵ Jefferies, *Gamekeeper*, 159.



1.10 'The Poacher', from *The Gamekeeper at Home*. Illustration by Charles Whympers. The poacher using woodcraft to escape detection.



1.11 'Setting a Hare Snare' from *The Gamekeeper at Home* 'Long Practice and delicate skill are essential to successful snaring.' 154.

An appealing feature of Jefferies' writing was that stylistically it often took the form of an instructional guide to life in the countryside. Certainly, the opening to its main section on poaching is reminiscent of the typological approach to be found in J.H Walsh's still popular *Manual of British Rural Sports*. Writing very much in the Walshian style of informed expert, Jefferies confidently announced that 'There are three kinds of poachers: the local men, the raiders coming in gangs from a distance, and the "mouchers" – fellows who do not precisely make a profession of it, but who occasionally loiter along the roads and hedges picking up whatever they can lay hands on.'¹⁶⁶ It is the first of these types, the 'professional' local poacher, which Jefferies decides to focus on. In other words, Jefferies' poachers are not Game Law victims or potentially violent members of a town-based gang, they are individual actors who play their role with craft and skill. Additionally, these men are frequently of 'superior intelligence' and tend to hold 'advanced views as to the "rights of labour"'.¹⁶⁷

Consciously or not, in writing on poachers in the above way Jefferies was channelling a number of earlier representations. Evidence given to the 1845-6 Select Committee on the Game Laws, recorded how 'Poachers are often men of considerable enterprise and intelligence', while the more 'professional' poachers in the stories by George Gleig and Thomas Miller are shown as being men above the average.¹⁶⁸ In the same decade in which Jefferies was writing on the subject, the former Chartist and radical publisher, John Bedford Leno, used his collection of poems on the Buckinghamshire village of 'Kimburton' to introduce the gifted amateur naturalist and poacher, Phil Harris:

He wasn't a man to be driven, / And too wide-awake to be led; / You could see by the ways he'd about 'un, / By the bright eyes that lit up his face, / He was made of the right stuff to govern, / But chance threw him in the wrong place.¹⁶⁹

Although in a later essay for the *St. James's Gazette* Jefferies could write of 'the exciting and profitable occupation of the poacher', whose actions compared favourably with the 'bloated aristocrats the preservers of game', on the whole he did not seek to politicise his subject.¹⁷⁰ This left the author free to concentrate on the more practical

¹⁶⁶ Jefferies, *Gamekeeper*, 146. And see 'Game as Property' in Samuel J. Looker (ed.), *Richard Jefferies: Field and Farm* (London, 1958), 128-31.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶⁸ BPP, IX, II.1, 1846, 559.

¹⁶⁹ John Bedford Leno, *Kimburton, A Story of Village Life* (London, 1889, first publ. 1875-6), 34.

¹⁷⁰ Richard Jefferies, 'The Hedgerow Sportsman' in Looker (ed.), *Chronicles*, 240.

aspects of his subject. As we read at the start of the section on poaching in *The Gamekeeper at Home*:

Poaching is no longer an amusement, a thing to be indulged in because 'It's my delight of a shiny night / In the season of the year'; but a hard, prosaic business ... requiring a long-headed, shrewd fellow, with a power of silence, capable of a delicacy of touch which almost raises poaching into a fine art.¹⁷¹

Having established that 'A professional poacher is pre-eminently a trapper', Jefferies then carefully documents the intricacies of snaring and netting, discussing which methods work best for particular animals. This level of carefully explained detail was not lost on the metropolitan press. According to the *Saturday Review*, 'There is a chapter which might have a great circulation were it published separately, under the title of the "Poacher's Best Companion," so wonderfully minute is the insight it gives into the tricks of the poacher's craft.'¹⁷²

Within this carefully documented account, we also learn that the local man could expect a considerable degree of community collusion. Contrary to the reports made by chief constables before the 1872-3 Select Committee, which claimed that sympathy towards poaching only extended to that done in the daytime, Jefferies also suggests that night poaching did not necessarily undermine this relationship and that the poacher's own class 'will hold their peace.'¹⁷³ On this last point *The Gamekeeper at Home* conceivably did much to shift the perception of night poaching away from its ready association with violent conflict between gangs of poachers and the keepers sent to thwart them. While Jefferies does not shy away from describing this 'guerilla warfare, and a later essay in the *Pall Mall Gazette* would be titled 'Shooting Poachers', the night-time woods are equally the domain of the 'judicious poacher' as he methodically sets about his evening's work.¹⁷⁴ Above all though, it is the painstakingly detailed richness of the writing which militates most strongly in favour of the poacher.¹⁷⁵ This point is even more apparent in what is perhaps the author's 'greatest contribution to Victorian letters', and what was also Edward Thomas' most treasured book, *The Amateur Poacher*.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Jefferies, *Gamekeeper*, 147.

¹⁷² *Saturday Review*, 10th August 1878, 188.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 147; BPP, XIII, 1873, *Select Committee on the Game Laws*, viii.

¹⁷⁴ Jefferies, *Gamekeeper*, 148, 198-201. Richard Jefferies, 'Shooting Poachers' in Looker (ed.), *Chronicles*, 232-36.

¹⁷⁵ Keith, *Richard Jefferies*, 73.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

Covering much of the same ground as *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *The Amateur Poacher* is also a very different work in its blending of a more novelistic sense with the apparently objective reportage which marks out the earlier book. Also, of course, we have poaching from the poacher's perspective. First of all, there is the author's own account of youthful poaching as the eponymous 'amateur'. Here we see the activity as a natural country pursuit for a curious and physically active boy, either in the company of his brother, or increasingly with Dickon, the grown-up son of a local publican. Poaching is therefore normalised as a healthy rite of passage to be set against the increasingly artificial, and physically undemanding world, of the modern shoot. Reviewing the book for the *Academy*, Charles P. Robinson noted how 'Most boys have done a little poaching in their time ... Surely there was a good deal more of the romance of sport in these boyish enterprises than in the bloodiest battue'.¹⁷⁷

Second, is our introduction to the village of 'Sarsen', a bastion of poaching and 'vicar-baiting' set in the heart of 'Lurcher Land'. Making the connection between poaching and an earthily vigorous self-reliance, Jefferies describes the place as having

no great landlord ... Besides the small famers, there are scores of cottage owners, every one of whom is perfectly independent. Nobody cares for anybody. It is a republic without even the semblance of a Government. It is liberty, equality, and swearing ... the mass of the inhabitants are the reddest of Reds.¹⁷⁸

However, our picture of Sarsen is an ambiguous one. The place is unkempt and many of the locals, including a dishonest keeper, seem addicted to a ruinously strong form of brown brandy.¹⁷⁹ Through playing up the radical politics of this poaching village there is also an element of satire akin to that found in George Soane's 1847 novel, *January Eve: A Tale of the Times*. Here we are introduced to the poacher, Tom Starlight, who from his corner in the Black Lion pub is a 'determined advocate of the rights of man' – at least before he thinks he has an inheritance.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the men of Sarsen retain enough practical sense to avoid poaching in the more heavily guarded preserves and cannily wait for the stray birds to come to them. Together with their dogs, they 'excel' in the art of poaching ground game and partridges and 'the broad open Downs are their

¹⁷⁷ *Academy*, 15th November 1879, 348.

¹⁷⁸ Jefferies, *Poacher*, 101-02.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 97-98, 102.

¹⁸⁰ George Soane, *January Eve: A Tale of the Times* (London, 1847), 24.

happy hunting grounds'.¹⁸¹ Unlike the blustering Tom Starlight, these are men to be reckoned with.

Third, and most importantly, we have Oby and his 'system'. Entirely a creation of Jefferies' pen, this committed poacher is given an authentic life and voice of his own. In this we might compare him to the poaching navvy, Bill. As with the latter, Oby learned his craft as a farm boy and later 'I went a-navigating ... and seed what a spree it were' [sic]. Having settled back home, Oby uses the skills he has gained to find employment in the daytime as a ditcher. This activity is key to the poacher's system, as from his vantage point 'out in the fields'

I watches everything as goes on, and marks the hares' tracks and the rabbit buries, and the double mounds and the little copses as the pheasants wanders off to in the autumn ... The dodge is to be always in the fields and to know everybody's ways. Then you may do just as you be a-mind [sic].¹⁸²

Yet the system is not infallible and the poacher has been before the bench 'heaps of times.' As with Bill, however, Oby regards this as a form of occupational hazard and always has the funds available to pay his fines. In fact, the poacher clearly enjoys his days in court, and revels in his local celebrity:

Last time the chairman said to I, 'So you be here again, Oby; we hear a good deal about you.' I says, 'Yes my lard, I be here agen, but people never don't hear nothing about *you*. That shut the old duffer up. Nobody never heard nothing of he' [sic].¹⁸³

With Oby, therefore, we have the poacher as a fully formed personality. Although we first encounter this 'Ishamaelite' lying drunk in the road, he has his own code of honour and is 'not insensible to kindness.'¹⁸⁴ But more than this, our rough-edged man of the fields has an experientially learned understanding of nature. From a lifetime spent in the open air he has deep knowledge about the weather and the habits of animals, and knows how to find the rarest of ferns and other woodland plants. In the closing passages of the book, the virtues of such a life are turned by Jefferies into an invocation that would later be adopted by Edward Thomas as his own personal creed:

Let us always be out of doors among the trees and grass, and rain and wind and sun ...
Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Jefferies, *Poacher*, 102.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 118-19.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

Having made the usual comparison between Jefferies' work and that of Gilbert White, the *British Quarterly Review* suggested how the greatest strength of *The Amateur Poacher* was to be found in the 'sympathy' it encouraged for a subject that 'may not have hitherto interested us, or may, indeed, have repelled us.'¹⁸⁶ However questionable these judgements might be - for example, the poacher was already an object of considerable interest - the anonymous reviewer made an important point. Appearing when they did, and in the form that they took, Jefferies' beautifully constructed accounts of poaching and poachers had a marked effect on the subject's representational development. If never wholly divorced from them, at the level of culture at least, the poacher would now be more than what the Game Laws made him.

Conclusion

Adapting Simon Dentith's analysis of culture and society in the nineteenth century, it might be argued that in the course of the period covered by this chapter poaching went from being an unremarkable feature in the daily life *of* rural England, to being a notable aspect of reported life *about* rural England.¹⁸⁷ Across an expanding range of cultural forms, poaching became more important as a subject of construction and consumption at the level of representation than it was about an everyday reality. The latter continued to feed into the former, but for growing numbers of the population poaching - be it as melodrama, morality tale, or anti-Game Law protest - was increasingly about what they saw and read, rather than what they actually knew or experienced. In this sense poaching was becoming more important, even as on the ground it appeared to become less so.

This paradox will be explored more fully in the two chapters that follow as we chart the poacher's representational development across the final decades of the century - a time which saw the perennial question of 'who owns the game?' expanded and deepened into 'who owns the land on which the game is on?' Early in 1879 the *Spectator* could be found remarking upon 'that love of open spaces ... which has arisen of late years, as

¹⁸⁶ *British Quarterly Review*, January 1880, 226.

¹⁸⁷ Simon Dentith, *Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1998), 76.

one of the results of our crowding in towns, and the hurry of our lives.’¹⁸⁸ The occasion for this comment was the ongoing legal dispute over access and use rights in Ashdown Forest in the face of the Seventh Earl De La Warr’s efforts to convert the area into a game preserve.¹⁸⁹ It is within this ‘wider discourse on open spaces’, itself an integral part of the re-emergent Land Question, that representations of the poacher (a living embodiment of these same ‘open spaces’) must also be considered.

¹⁸⁸ Brian Short, ‘Environmental politics, custom and personal testimony: memory and lifespace on the late Victorian Ashdown Forest, Sussex’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 30 (2004), 472.

¹⁸⁹ Brian Short, ‘Conservation, Class and Custom: Lifespace and Conflict in a Nineteenth-Century Forest Environment’, *Rural History*, 10 (1999), 140.

Chapter Two

National Questions: The Game Laws, the Land and Poaching in Late-Victorian England, c.1880-1900

I come fresh into your country life, and the first thing that strikes me is that the whole machinery of law and order seems to exist for nothing in the world but to protect your pheasants!¹

What creates so universal a detestation of these laws is the instinctive feeling that both the game and the land have been filched from the people.²

The poacher is but the Saxon serf denied the privilege of the preserves. There is a good deal to be said in his favour.³

In September 1880 Gladstone's second administration enacted the first significant reform to the Game Laws since 1831. Agreed in cabinet as a 'limited but practical measure to obviate grievances', the Ground Game Act was aimed principally at farmers in response to worsening conditions in the rural economy and a well-orchestrated campaign for redress.⁴ Even limited reform to these laws carried obvious symbolic weight and foreshadowed developments later in the decade. Similar to the 1830s, changes to the Game Laws preceded wider political reform – in this case the Acts which effectively gave rural labourers the vote and which brought elected local government to the counties. For one historian of Victorian England, the Act was indicative of the 'new politics' that marked the 'point at which the old regime began to break.'⁵ In advising his fellow peers to go against their natural instincts and allow the game Bill through, Lord Beaconsfield (Disraeli) had warned how any obstruction to the will of the Commons would be liable to 'much misrepresentation' and be against the mood of the 'great body of the people.'⁶ As a case in point, the previous winter saw a colourful demonstration against the Game Laws in Exeter that included a brass band and the display of dead hares and rabbits suspended on poles. In this instance the action was in response to the

¹ Beth Sutton-Ramspeck and Nicole B. Meller (eds), Mary Augusta Ward, *Marcella* (Peterborough, Ontario, 1985), 173.

² Charles Wicksteed, *The Land for the People: how to obtain it and how to manage it* (London, 1894), 55.

³ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 27th November 1892.

⁴ NA, CAB 41/14/8, 12th May 1880.

⁵ G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London, 1962), 230, 249.

⁶ *Hansard*, Third Series, 30th August 1880, 620.

imprisonment of a farmer's son and one of his labourers for the poaching of hares on land occupied (but not owned) by the farmer himself.⁷

However, if going some way to address farmer's grievances, the Ground Game Act failed to resolve the wider social and economic tensions produced by large-scale recreational shooting, or the operation of the laws surrounding it. Alternatively seen by sporting landlords as a not to be repeated concession to 'revolutionary rubbish', and by a growing body of land reformers as a pale response to unregenerate landlordism, the battle lines remained clearly drawn.⁸ With the amount of land taken up by sporting estates continuing to increase, even as concerns about the nation's agricultural future deepened and greater demands for 'access' were pushed, the issue of game and its preservation gained added traction. It is against these wider aspects to the game question that the poacher's representational development needs to be considered. In seconding Peter Taylor's latest measure to abolish the Game Laws in March 1880, Sir George Campbell claimed that although in practice the poacher was 'an unpopular person', he believed that 'Shakespeare, Robin Hood, and other distinguished persons, who had come down to us as great men and great heroes, were poachers.'⁹

The main purpose of the current chapter is to establish the social and political setting within which poacher representations were produced and consumed in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. The opening sections take the passage of the Ground Game Act as their point of focus as they trace the mounting controversy surrounding game preservation and land use. Staying with this theme we then consider the act of trespass and its relation to ideas (and practices) of poaching. Finally we turn to the apparent decline in the act of poaching itself. In a reversal of the previous trend, increased efforts in preservation no longer seem to be paralleled by rising levels of game being taken. With poaching as a declining threat to law and order in the countryside, new representational possibilities opened up, just as the means of producing and consuming them advanced further.

⁷ *The Times*, 17th November 1879.

⁸ A.G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt*, vol. i (London, 1923), 375.

⁹ *Hansard*, Third Series, 2nd March 1880, 188.

In the late nineteenth century the ownership and use of the countryside, along with the continued operation of the Game Laws, were of growing national interest. Manchester's Central Library, for instance, holds a number of contemporary tracts and pamphlets belonging to the largely middle-class National Reform Union that relate to the rural aspects of the Land Question, as well as material produced by the London-based Anti-Game Law League.¹⁰ In *A Townsman's View of the Village Question*, an 1892 pamphlet by a lecturer for the NRU, the 'community of interest' between urban and rural workers was strongly emphasised with the former being told how the 'game laws press hardly' on the rural labourer 'whilst from the land he is practically excluded.'¹¹ Moving into the world of the urban working classes, Robert Blatchford's hugely popular and influential *Merrie England*, based on a series of fictive letters to John Smith of Oldham, is full of the idea of an unproductive countryside organised for the benefit and pleasure of a wealthy few.¹² For Blatchford and his wider Clarion movement, the countryside was a cultural and aesthetic resource as well as an economic one. As well as recommending the writings of the radical land reformer, Henry George, Blatchford also promoted those of Richard Jefferies.

By refusing to accept 'exclusion' from the land of his birth by trespassing on it in pursuit of game, the poacher and his actions had the clear potential to symbolise 'that manly independence which forms so strong an element in the English character' that patriotically minded radicals were keen to associate with.¹³ Shakespeare's possible exploits as a poacher could be made much of here, and for those so minded he could be numbered as both an opponent of the Game Laws and of landlordism in general.¹⁴ Within the eminently respectable early Labour movement, Clare Griffiths has noted how 'poachers of the past and trespassers of the present were equally celebrated.'¹⁵ But before returning to the issue of the land and its relationship to the poacher, we need first to establish a fuller sense of the passage and terms of the measure over which squires

¹⁰ Manchester Central Library, Special Collections (Land Question). The papers of the Lib-Lab MP for Bethnal Green, George Howell, tell a similar story. George Howell Collection: Bishopsgate Institute.

¹¹ J. Middleton, *A Townsman's View of the Village Question* (Manchester, 1892), 4, 14.

¹² Martin Wright, 'Robert Blatchford, The Clarion Movement, and the Crucial Years of British Socialism, 1891-1900' in Tony Brown (ed.), *Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism* (London, 1990), 74-78.

¹³ Middleton, *Townsman's View*, 11.

¹⁴ Antony Taylor, 'Shakespeare and Radicalism: The Uses and Abuses of Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century Popular Politics', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 363-64.

¹⁵ Clare V. J. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007), 93.

‘ground their teeth’ and ‘luncheon-table talkers became apoplectic’, the 1880 Ground Game Act.¹⁶

Limited Measures: the Ground Game Act

Shortly after coming to power in 1874, Benjamin Disraeli agreed with his colleagues ‘not to touch the Game Laws this year’ but instead to establish a committee that would consider the issue of compensation for farmers whose crops had allegedly been damaged by game.¹⁷ Nothing more was heard. But if the Conservatives were little inclined to act, an increasingly frustrated farming community were of an opposite mind. When the Farmer’s Alliance was established in 1879 reform of the Game Laws was made a leading priority.¹⁸ Just as Bright had done in the 1840s, prominent Liberals like the future Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, now took up the issue of Game Law reform in a bid to weaken the electoral hold traditionally enjoyed by Conservatives in the countryside.¹⁹ While not supporting Taylor’s motion to abolish the laws altogether, Harcourt used the debate in March 1880 to call for more limited reform.²⁰ Against the backdrop of worsening conditions in the rural economy, the longstanding claim that too much game was bad for good husbandry gained added force. With Gladstone also speaking of the need for reform, the Liberal message appears to have found its mark. On the eve of the election that would eventually see his return to office, a pamphlet on *Farmer’s Grievances and how to Remedy Them* was insisting that ‘The Game nuisance ... is unquestionably a substantial grievance to the farmer ... until a Liberal Government attains power the great Game Plague will never be alleviated.’²¹ In May 1880 what was then termed the Hares and Rabbits Bill was duly introduced into the Commons by Harcourt.²²

¹⁶ Gardiner, *Harcourt*, 373; Lady Warwick quoted in O.F. Christie, *The Transition to Democracy, 1867-1914* (London, 1934), 156-57.

¹⁷ NA, CAB 41/6/16, 12th November 1874.

¹⁸ J.H. Porter, ‘Poaching and Social Conflict in Late Victorian Devon’ in Andrew Charlesworth (ed.), *Rural Social Change and Conflicts Since 1500* (Humburside, 1982), 100-101.

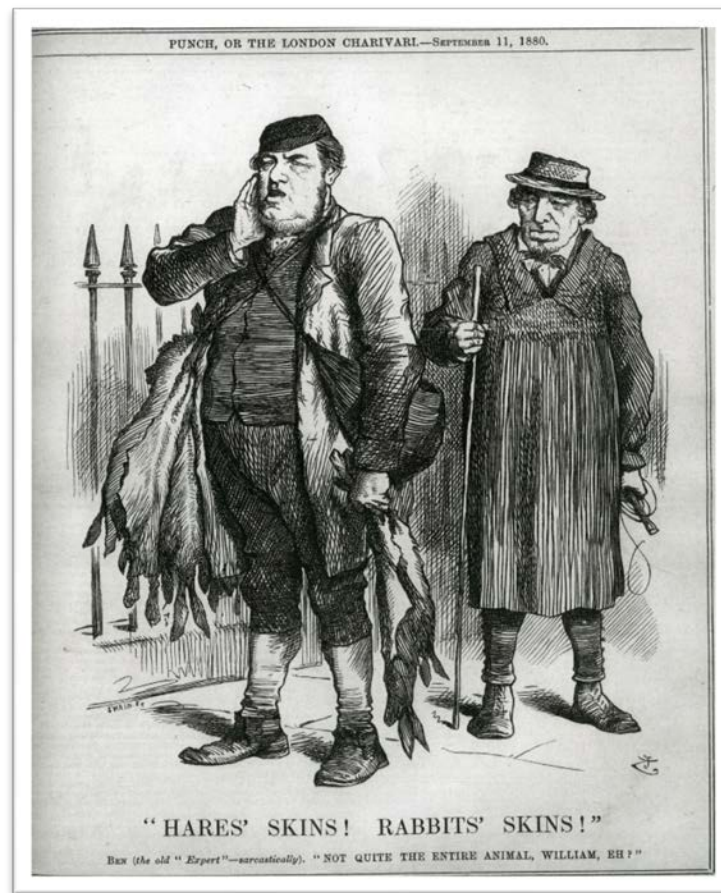
¹⁹ Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: The Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906-14* (Woodbridge, 2001), 10.

²⁰ Gardiner, *Harcourt*, 372.

²¹ I.S. Steadman, *Farmer’s Grievances And How To Remedy Them At The General Election* (London, 1880), 21-22. Harcourt received numerous letters from the farming community endorsing his proposals. See Bodleian Library, Sir William Harcourt Papers, MS. Harcourt 94.

²² *Annual Register for the Year 1880* (London, 1881), 91.

Eventually passed in September 1880, the Ground Game Act as it was now called marked a notable change to the existing law. The heated comment it excited in the press, and the reluctance with which it was yielded by its opponents, are vivid testament to this.²³ Although hedged around with restrictions, and doing nothing to address the vexed issues of winged game or compensation, by giving tenants the concurrent right to the hares and rabbits found on their property, the Act allowed for improved rights of contract and in theory made the tenant less subordinate to the landlord [Fig. 2.1].²⁴



2.1 Punch's comment on the limitations of the Ground Game Act, 11th September 1880. The figure selling skins is Harcourt, the man behind is Disraeli.

Aside from gaining a degree of independence over pest control, the new measure also gave tenant farmers valued (if limited) shooting rights over the land which they held. Under the terms of the Act, the occupier and one other designated person were permitted to use firearms. In other words, the tenant would not be able to stage his own shooting parties, a point that subsequent guides to the Game Laws were keen to make.

²³ Ibid., 91-4; Gardiner, *Harcourt*, 373-75.

²⁴ Fisher, 'Property Rights', 177.

With winged game still firmly off limits, recreational shooting remained very much an elite pastime. Moreover, the Act did nothing to revise other disputed aspects of the Game Laws, and the Poaching Prevention Act remained a source of considerable resentment. Gladstone's later claims that the Act had both ended the Game Laws as an 'apology' for poaching and resolved the controversy over crop damage were at best debatable.²⁵

Despite its obvious limitations, historians have also tended to see the Act in a positive light with Roland Quinault, amongst others, claiming that it 'put an end to the game question as a major political issue'.²⁶ The consensus has not gone unquestioned however. In a notable act of self-revision, F.M.L Thompson came to the view that if farmer's grievances 'were eased' by the Act they were 'by no means wholly removed' and that the Game Laws remained a cause of much ill-feeling in the countryside.²⁷ More emphatically, J.H. Porter has made the case for there being 'a considerable over-estimate of the benefit to farmers' and has likewise highlighted the persistence of underlying tensions between landlord and tenant.²⁸ Glancing through the pages of the *Field* and the *Gamekeeper* (established in 1897) one finds numerous accounts of disputed legal cases originating from the Act. 'There is a written law to give us the hares and rabbits and an unwritten law that says we may not take them', declared one Lancashire farmer when questioned in 1894.²⁹ Game preserving landlords also remained openly hostile to the Act and were determined to yield nothing further. Like many landowning MPs, W. Bromley Davenport was fiercely opposed to this 'mischievous' and 'useless' piece of legislation and deeply resented what he saw as the growing 'cockney censure' of a country gentleman's amusements.³⁰ Driven by sentiments like these, the field sports community itself now turned to extra-parliamentary organisation as a means of defending its interests from further attack.

²⁵ W.E. Gladstone, 'Locksley Hall and the Jubilee', *Nineteenth Century*, January 1887, 9, 11.

²⁶ Roland Quinault quoted in Readman, *Land*, 16; Pollock, 'Game Laws', 316; R.C.K. Ensor, *England, 1870-1914* (Oxford, 1987, first publ. 1936), 86; John Grigg, *Lloyd George: The Young Lloyd George* (2002, first publ. 1973), 144-45.

²⁷ F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society* (London, 1988), 341. And see the same author's *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1963), 141.

²⁸ J.H. Porter, 'Tenant Right: Devonshire and the 1880 Ground Game Act', *Agricultural History Review*, 34 (1986), 188, 196.

²⁹ Quoted in Howkins, *Rural England*, 161.

³⁰ W. Bromley Davenport, *Sport* (London, 1888), 108, 118.

The appearance of the National Sports Defence Association in the summer of 1884 was partly inspired by an article from earlier in the year in the Conservative supporting *National Review*.³¹ Sounding a clear call to arms, the judge and historian of India, W.S. Seton Karr, claimed that in this ‘age of associations’ the ‘Ultra-Liberal’ Ground Game Act was motivated ‘more by dislike to the squire than by love of the farmer’ and was intended to bring about the former’s extinction.³² This view found strong endorsement the following year from the expert on rural affairs and close friend of Disraeli, T.E. Kebbel. An eloquent apologist for the Game Laws and the rights of sporting landowners, Kebbel insisted how the Ground Game Act was ‘a stepping stone to more sweeping measures’ in that it ‘plays into the hands of organised land robbers.’³³ Beyond the generic ‘Radical’ who frequented commercial hotels and gave lectures on the ‘abominations of “landlordism”’, a more specific object for Kebbel’s scorn was John Bright, who forty years on from his first campaign was still calling for the Game Laws to be repealed. Along with other radical MPs like Peter Taylor, as well as some members of the Farmer’s Alliance, Bright had supported the Ground Game Act as a first step towards more sweeping reform.³⁴

Of particular concern to the Association’s supporters was the degree to which ‘spouters’ like Bright would be able to sway voters newly enfranchised under the Third Reform Act by attaching the issue of Game Law repeal to the wider cause of land reform.³⁵ Similarly worrying was the emergence of Bright’s heir apparent as the radical voice of Liberalism, Joseph Chamberlain. At the start of 1885 the MP for Birmingham had chosen his home ground to give a widely reported speech that effectively launched the so-called ‘Radical Programme’. In words which the *Economist* felt were full of the ‘philosophy of Robin Hood, or even Jack Sheppard’ (and which bore the influence of the economic historian, Thorold Rogers), Chamberlain claimed that at one time every

³¹ Callum C. McKenzie, ‘The Origins of the British Field Sports Society’, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 13 (1996), 178-79. The organisation was renamed the Field Sports Protection and Encouragement Association in 1885. In 1908 this merged with the Game Guild to form the Field Sports and Game Guild.

³² W.S. Seton Karr, ‘Our Game Laws’, *National Review*, February 1884, 848-49.

³³ T.E. Kebbel, ‘Game and the Game Laws in England’, *Quarterly Review*, July 1885, 228.

³⁴ Anti-Game Law League, *The Game Laws. Speeches of the Right Hon. John Bright and Mr. P.A. Taylor* (London, 1880).

³⁵ W.S. Seton Karr, ‘The Defence of Field Sports’, *Baily’s Magazine*, August 1885, 323. Bright had recently published a pamphlet aimed at newly enfranchised voters in which land and Game Law reform were both mentioned.

man had enjoyed 'a right to a part in the land of his birth.'³⁶ In developing his theme of alienation from the land, he went on to ask

Are the game laws a right of property? Is it just to expect that the amusements of the rich, carried even to barbarous excess, should be protected by an anomalous and Draconian code of law, and that the community should be called upon to maintain in gaol men are made criminal by this legislation, although they have committed no moral offence?³⁷

Although the coming crisis over Ireland would ultimately push Chamberlain into Liberal Unionism, control of the land and the workings of the Game Laws were now an established part of the more radical Liberal platform and had probably contributed to the party's success in the election of 1885.³⁸ Building on a message developed over the previous decade, the victorious Liberal candidate for North-West Norfolk, Joseph Arch, had included the 'complete reform of the land laws' and those 'affecting the preservation of game' in his address to electors.³⁹ Four years later in the first ever County Council elections to be held in England and Wales, Liberal candidates could be found attacking the Poaching Prevention Act, and in January 1894 Joseph Arch and David Lloyd George were part of a group of MPs behind an unsuccessful attempt to repeal the Act altogether.⁴⁰ With publications like *Reynolds' Newspaper and Truth* - a sixpenny weekly founded in 1877 by the radical Liberal MP and abolitionist, Henry Labouchere - continuing to expose their 'tyrannical' nature, even if the politics of the Game Laws were to some degree reset by the reform of 1880, they were certainly not ended.⁴¹

Game Preserving and Shooting in Late-Victorian England

By the time of the Ground Game Act's introduction, the number of gamekeepers employed in England and Wales stood at over 12,500, an increase of around 5000 since 1851. Come the census of 1901, gamekeeper numbers were in excess of 16,500 - a rise

³⁶ *Economist*, 10th January 1885. And see C.H.D. Howard, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the "Unauthorised Programme"', *English Historical Review*, 65 (1950), 482-44.

³⁷ Chamberlain quoted in W.D. Handcock (ed.), *English Historical Documents, 1874-1914* (London, 2000), 107-08.

³⁸ Patricia Lynch, *The Liberal Party in Rural England, 1885-1910* (Oxford, 2003), ch. 1.

³⁹ Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch* (Kington, 1971), 168, 234-45.

⁴⁰ Lynch, *Liberal Party*, 95, *Hansard*, Fourth Series, 3rd January 1894, 752.

⁴¹ Labouchere had voted against the Ground Game Act on the basis that it was not abolition.

of 121 per cent over the previous half century.⁴² But the increase wasn't just in gamekeepers. According to the official figures, the number of game licenses issued for the season 1856-7 stood at 28,950, but by 1870 the corresponding figure was almost 46,000 – due in part to the Game Licensing Act of 1860 which had reduced the annual charge to £3 and introduced a half-yearly licence at the cost of £2. By 1896 over 50,000 game licences were being issued for England and Wales alone.⁴³ However, given the tendency of many sportsmen to avoid purchasing a licence, the actual number of shooters is likely to have been higher. Yet despite the apparent rise in participation, access to the shooting of game - which itself depended on access to the land on which it was found - remained very much reserved to a minority. Even if the practice of rented shooting (along with the creation of 14 day licences in 1883) made a version of the sport available to wealthier urbanites, compared to the wider expansion of sporting provision which marked the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the world of the game shoot remained a conspicuously closed one.⁴⁴

Continued growth, at least in terms of scale, can also be measured through the expenditure of sporting estates on the rearing and preservation of game and the size of the bags that were subsequently achieved. Between the 1830s and the 1890s, for example, spending on the Savernake estate in Wiltshire rose from around £700 per annum to £1500, whilst the game books for the Heydon estate in Norfolk record that in 1830 just 101 pheasants and 100 partridges were shot compared to 1643 and 299 respectively in 1890.⁴⁵ But this was relatively small fry. At Sandringham over 12,000 pheasants a year were now being reared, while at Elvedon in Suffolk (acquired in 1894 by the recently ennobled Edward Cecil Guinness) huge resources were expended in developing the shooting. By the end of the century it was judged 'a poor day if less than a thousand head of game were killed' at Elvedon.⁴⁶ Such figures are starkly indicative of the growing predominance of the pheasant over the traditionally more favoured partridge. An important reason for this was that as well as being able to fly higher,

⁴² Horn, *Pleasures and Pastimes*, 99.

⁴³ Pollock, 'Game Laws', 247; Alastair J. Durie, 'Game Shooting: An Elite Sport, c.1870-1980', *Sport in History*, 28 (2008), 434.

⁴⁴ Neil Tranter, *Sport, economy and society in Britain, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), 15-19.

⁴⁵ Thompson, *Landed Society*, 138; NRO, Bulwer of Heydon Family Papers, Game Books and Accounts, 1829-1908. BUL 11 / 159-196.

⁴⁶ Martin, *Great Shoots*; 124-25; George Martelli, *The Elvedon Enterprise: A Story of the Second Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1952), 49-50.

which meant that for the better shots the ‘rocketer’ became a prized target, with the necessary time and resources the pheasant was much easier to produce in large quantities. While adaptations in moorland management and better transport links had resulted in grouse-shooting also becoming more popular, this was undoubtedly the age of the pheasant.⁴⁷

With the heightened accuracy of sporting guns, and with the driving of birds over them continuing to be refined, the amount of game that an estate could yield was ever more at a premium. However, the growing emphasis on the size of the bag was not to everyone’s taste. Years before the establishment in 1891 of the Humanitarian League, an organisation which found much to abhor in modern game shooting, the so-called ‘battue men’ had frequently had their sporting credentials, and taste, called into question.⁴⁸ This viewpoint was neatly summarised by the journalist T.H.S. Escott in his wide-ranging survey of English politics and society first published in 1880. In the author’s opinion it was

an age of exaggeration, and the battues are as Brobdignagian as the weapons with which the quarries are slain are precise. The sport of destruction is compressed into a few weeks or days, according to the capacities of the estate. The birds brought home are reckoned not by the few modest brace, but by the hundred or thousand head ... It is only from paintings of the old school that we can get an idea of the sport of the old order.⁴⁹

Adding further to the desire for greater concentrations of game were the growing commercial possibilities of a well-run shooting estate. Although certainly not beginning with the agricultural downturn of the late 1870s, there is no doubt that with more traditional sources of income declining, landlords in the hardest hit southern and eastern regions increasingly sought an outlet in the sale or rental market in which the offer of well-stocked preserves was usually seen as a major asset. In some parts of the country farming and the management of woodland now became increasingly subordinate to the needs of game preserving. If, as the Hammonds’ suggested, poaching became a useful means of ‘rehabilitating’ the economic plight of the rural labourer, for many landowners in the late nineteenth century the exploitation of game as a saleable commodity achieved a similar outcome.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ On the development of northern grouse moors see Andrew Done and Richard Muir, ‘The Landscape History of Game Shooting in the Yorkshire Dales’, *Rural History*, 12 (2001), 195-210.

⁴⁸ ‘Idstone’ [Thomas Pearce], *The ‘Idstone’ Papers: A Series of Articles and Desultory Observations on Sport and Things in General* (London, 1872), 236.

⁴⁹ T.H.S. Escott, *England: Its People, Polity and Pursuits* (London, 1885, first publ. 1880), 312.

⁵⁰ Hammonds, *Village Labourer*, 186.

Yet however welcome such arrangements were for cash-starved landlords, or indeed the rising numbers of people whose livelihoods were based on the fortunes of game shooting, the leasing or sale of such estates to moneyed outsiders from the worlds of industry and commerce did little to promote harmonious relations in the countryside. Neither did it ease concerns at the material damage allegedly caused by the growing amounts of preserved game, and which was claimed to be worse in areas where sporting estates were rented rather than owned. A clear articulation of these concerns can be found in *Punch's* regular comments on the nature of modern game shooting [Fig. 2.2].



2.2 *Punch*, 1881. *Pictures From Punch* (London, 1894), 34. Compare to the men in Figs. 1.9 & 1.10.

The more intensive preservation needed to produce more birds to shoot at also meant more land put aside for the purpose and the more vigorous enforcement of trespass restrictions. According to the writer and defender of more traditional shooting practices, Frederick Gale, 'One of the worst features in the present age of the *nouveaux riches* ... is the shocking way in which footpaths have been stopped ... Paths through the woods and fields are stopped everywhere.'⁵¹ Not only was this a common source of frustration for the growing numbers of urban-dwellers who looked increasingly to the countryside for their recreation, it further added to the sense of wilful (and selfish) mismanagement and under exploitation of a vital national resource. For critics of the game preserving

⁵¹ Frederick Gale, 'Village Life in the Olden Time', *English Illustrated Magazine*, January 1892, 324-25.

landlord, an easily arrived at cause for the so-called 'rural exodus' was that those who would work the land as opposed to merely sport on it were effectively being driven off. One prominent writer on the subject, P. Anderson Graham, recalled being told by one 'rough bearded Saxon in the prime of life' that the labourer's main grievance was not absence of work or low wages but lack of access to the land: "They shut us out", said the man, "for the sake of a few **** rabbits and pheasants."⁵² Along with concerns over the rural economy and the future supply of food, it is no coincidence that the Land Question revived just at the point when the preservation and shooting of game was building to its historic peak.

The Late-Victorian Land Question

If not having the intensity it would come to have in the Edwardian era, by the 1880s the Land Question was subject to increasing amounts of attention and political activity. In this sense the fierce debates over what became the Ground Game Act were predictive. From the followers of the American author of *Progress and Poverty*, Henry George, to the landed defenders of the status quo, the question drew comment from across the social and ideological spectrum. In part this was because the Land Question was not just about landlord-tenant relations and the distribution of ownership, it was also about the longstanding privileges with which the possession of land was associated.⁵³

Enumerating the various benefits of land ownership in 1881, Lord Derby placed political and social importance along with the 'residential enjoyment, including what is called sport' above what he laconically termed 'the money return'.⁵⁴

Indeed, it was the 15th Earl who had done much to fuel the current debate through his advocacy in the previous decade of a so-called New Domesday Survey. In moving for the inquiry Derby's intention had been to refute the charges made as to the extent of the landholding monopoly. Appearing in 1876 as the *Return of the Owners of Land*, the New Domesday findings ostensibly achieved Derby's aim. At the same time, however, the counter claim was 'amply vindicated' as the statistics revealed how 'exceptionally

⁵² P. Anderson Graham, *The Revival of English Agriculture* (London, 1899), 17.

⁵³ Newby, *Country Life*, 139.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom, 1878-1952* (London, 1976), 17.

concentrated' landownership nevertheless was.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, notes David Cannadine, 'These detailed revelations were a godsend to radicals anxious to agitate the land question ... in assailing patrician privilege and territorial monopoly, they had the facts on their side'⁵⁶

Flowing from the above, a crucial aspect of the Land Question as applied to the countryside was the issue's underlying narrative whereby the few lived at the expense of the many upon land they had no proper right to. As Henry George wrote in the book that sold in its tens of thousands, 'It is not merely a robbery of the past; it is a robbery in the present'.⁵⁷ Drawing its energy from this core point, land reform became the motive force in a complex discursive loop in which were placed 'a whole range of national, cultural and political aspirations'.⁵⁸ From the time of Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers, through to the Chartist campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century, this narrative of the land as a lost birth right was far from new and had long been tied to belief in the Norman Yoke and opposition to enclosure. Regaining access to the land was both a source and symbol of emancipation. In the words of the Georgite 'Land Song' (later adopted by Edwardian Liberals): 'The Land! The Land! Twas God that gave the land / ... Why should we be beggars with our ballots in our hand?'⁵⁹

Retaining a significant place within this narrative of land 'filched' from the people was hostility to the preservation of game and its attendant laws – a ready and easily understood signifier of the wider evils of landlordism. Come the start of the 1880s, therefore, the scene was well set for a new generation of land campaigners who would carry the cause into the next century in what Avner Offer vividly describes as nothing less than a '*Kulturkampf*'.⁶⁰ By the time that Chamberlain was launching his own platform in Birmingham, the two most active groups of the day were the Land Nationalisation Society (established in 1881 by the distinguished naturalist Alfred Wallace), and the Henry George inspired English Land Restoration League (1884). If

⁵⁵ David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, (NY, 1999), 55.

⁵⁶ Cannadine, *Decline*, 56.

⁵⁷ Quoted in E. Eldon Barry, *Nationalisation in British Politics: The Historical Background* (London, 1965), 20.

⁵⁸ Newby, *Country Life*, 142.

⁵⁹ Andrew Whitehead, 'God Gave the Land to the People: The Liberal "Land Song"', *History Workshop Online*, May 2011, <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-land-song/>.

⁶⁰ Avner Offer, *Property and Politics, 1870-1914. Landownership, Law, Ideology and Urban Development in England* (London, 1992), 371.

the two groups proposed different solutions, in regarding the land as a natural monopoly to be exploited for the interests of the many they had a fundamental unity of aim. They also adopted similar campaigning tactics through the dissemination of written propaganda and the use brightly painted vans to conduct regular publicity tours – the latter carefully calibrated so as not to encroach on the other's territory.⁶¹

Both organisations made frequent reference to the Game Laws where themes like dispossession, waste and exclusion from the land could be made much of. If land, like game, was part of Nature's bounty, to fence it off in the name of sport was morally indefensible. Bearing strong traces of Norman Yoke theory, an 1881 'Tract' by Wallace himself complained of the 'Many millions of acres' that are 'set aside as private parks, game preserves, deer forests, and pleasure grounds, the so-called private owner having no better or higher title to these acres than his feudal ancestor, who acquired them either through force or fraud'.⁶² In contrast to the ELRL, which focused its Red Van tours on the Midlands and the south, the LNS centred its Yellow Van tours more on the north of the country and took a particular interest in mining villages – urban/rural centres that often had a reputation for poaching.⁶³ Such was the connection between these places and the LNS that in 1894 a Yellow Van was established as 'a permanent institution' in the Durham coalfield.⁶⁴

Similar appeals to the past, and the sense of natural rights abrogated, are to be found in the work of the ELRL. One of its most experienced platform orators had a well-rehearsed speech that unfolded in the following (and by now familiar) way:

the birds in the air, the wild creatures in the fields and in the woods, whose are they? If you fail to understand how a wild animal can be private property, your landlord sitting in the seat of justice will see to it that you have seven days' leisure to think about the problem.⁶⁵

Together with such well-worn tropes as this, land reformers also drew on Kingsley's famous denunciation of the Game Laws secure in the knowledge that the reference would be understood. Reporting on the desperate state of housing in villages where the

⁶¹ Barry, *Nationalisation*, 66.

⁶² Alfred Wallace, *LNS Tract No.2* (London, 1881), 3.

⁶³ *Field*, 17th March 1900; *Gamekeeper*, October 1901, 6. And see H.J. Smith, 'The Pitman Poacher', *Durham County Local History Society Bulletin*, 65 (2002), 110-20.

⁶⁴ Barry, *Nationalisation*, 66.

⁶⁵ M.K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, 1859-1919: A Study of English Village Life* (Cambridge, 1961), 154.

landlord held sway, an ELRL publication from the early 1890s claimed how it was worse now than when ‘Charles Kingsley sang of the “Poacher’s Widow”’.⁶⁶ Included in cheap collections of verse and referred to in illustrated lectures on the developing labour movement, the message of ‘The Poacher’s Widow’ was also to be found in the wider radical discourse of the period in which the dissenting voice of ‘the people’ was consistently raised against the land-game nexus and the injurious nature of the laws surrounding it.⁶⁷

As well as the Game Laws being used as an everyday example of landlordism’s many iniquities, frequent use was made of the losses sustained through the associated process of enclosure. Significantly here, the sense of a ‘lost’ pre-enclosure world existed not just as a powerful social memory but as a more recent - and in some cases ongoing - aspect of contemporary life. Towards the end of the century, one of the leading figures in both the Commons Preservation Society (founded in 1865), and the National Trust (1894), Sir Robert Hunter, was stating how ‘the Lord of the Manor has been often the enemy rather than the protector of the common. He wishes to inclose, in order to enlarge his fields or his game preserves’.⁶⁸ The legislative basis for this was the General Enclosure Act of 1845 that had been designed to rationalise, and speed up, the existing mechanism. Although the number of these late enclosures reduced in the wake of the Commons Act (1876), between the establishment of the measure and the outbreak of war in 1914, 883 enclosures took place.⁶⁹ Although in terms of what had gone before the total area affected was much less dramatic, for several reasons this final phase of enclosure was of much importance in both the wider development of the Land Question and the more specific one of access to open spaces. In turn, this connected back to the poacher.

First, much of this effort focused on areas of common land close to urban centres. The establishment of the CPS was itself triggered by the desire to preserve such areas in and around London. By the mid-1890s the CPS was dealing with around 100 cases per year,

⁶⁶ ELRL, *Among the Agricultural Labourers with the Red Vans, 1894* (London, 1895), 10.

⁶⁷ J.A. Leatham (ed.), *Poems for Socialists* (Aberdeen, 1891), 16-18; A.C.E., *The Tale of the Toilers, or, An Epitome of the Labour Movement* (London, 1895), 11.

⁶⁸ Sir Robert Hunter, *The Preservation of Open Spaces, and of Footpaths and Other Rights of Way* (London, 1896), 6.

⁶⁹ Alun Howkins, ‘The Use and Abuse of the English Commons, 1845-1914’, *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (2014), 110.

a figure which by the turn of the century had risen to over 300.⁷⁰ With many of these actions supported by sympathetic elements in the press, disputes over threatened common land or the closure of footpaths had considerable reach. Appearing in the *Strand Magazine* in the autumn and winter of 1891-2 (and later republished by the ELRL), J.F. Sullivan's *The Queer Side of Landlordism* offered a biting satire on Sir Ogre de Covetous, a Thameside magistrate firmly committed to enclosure. Having charged a man for poaching rabbits on some 'public land but lately enclosed', the villagers respond by burning the effigy of the 'good Knight'. Earlier in the story we learn of some stained glass in the parish church 'that is believed to represent an Ancestor of his in the Act of slaying a fence destroyer'.⁷¹

Second, as the tale of Sir Covetous suggests, enclosure remained a fiercely contested practice. In a long-running dispute between the residents of Headington Quarry - a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Oxford well-known for its poachers - and two of the university's colleges, resistance was partly based on the alleged existence of a mythical 'book' setting out the rights of the villagers to use the Brasenose and Magdalen 'Opens'.⁷² At around this time an article on the Game Laws in the *Westminster Review* was informing readers how in Norfolk, one of the country's premier shooting counties, recent history had been 'one long revelation of contested rights - the pulling down of fences wrongfully erected.'⁷³ Even within such establishment bodies as the CPS, and later the National Footpaths Preservation Society, 'preservationism' carried a radical and progressive (as well as conservative) charge that combined popular notions of the past with an assertive rights-based culture. In this, argues Jeremy Burchardt, 'there was some consonance between preservationist commitment to access and the struggle against usurping landowners which this sometimes involved.'⁷⁴ The guiding force of the CPS, which merged with the NFPS in 1899, was George Shaw Lefevre. A senior Liberal politician with a deep interest in the Land Question, Shaw Lefevre was also an expert on the Game Laws which he

⁷⁰ Paul Readman, 'Preserving the English Landscape, c.1870-1914', *Cultural and Social History*, 5, (2008), 198.

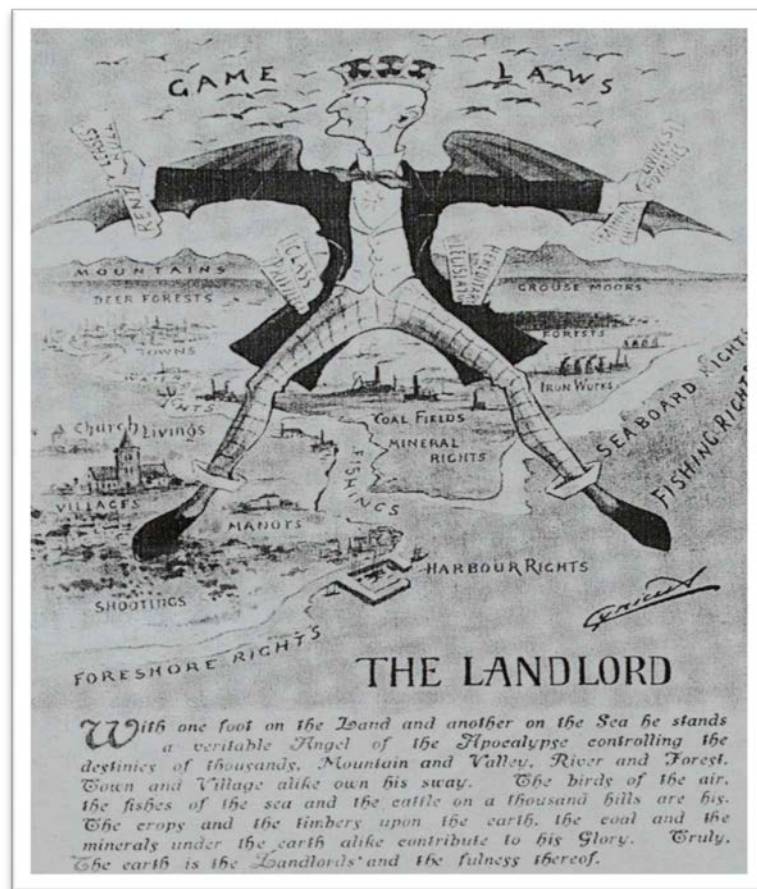
⁷¹ J.F. Sullivan, *The Queer Side of Landlordism* (London, 1892) 9-11. First published in the *Strand Magazine*, October 1891 and January 1892.

⁷² Howkins, 'Diggers', 7-8. And see Raphael Samuel, 'Quarry Roughs: Life and Labour in Headington Quarry, 1860-1914' in Samuel (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (London, 1975), 207-223.

⁷³ Charles Roper, 'How the Game Laws Work', *Westminster Review*, July 1893, 358.

⁷⁴ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 100-01.

considered easily traceable to the 'feudal principles which were introduced into this country by the Norman conquerors' [Fig. 2.3].⁷⁵



2.3 The Game Law upholding landlord as a ravening bird of prey. The illustration from 1893 is by the cartoonist and postcard designer 'Cynicus' [Martin Anderson]. Anderson was a strong believer in the idea of the Norman Yoke. See 'Cynicus', *Who Shall Rule: Briton or Norman?*, Tayport, 1911. Image courtesy of Professor Antony Taylor.

Within this setting of late-Victorian enclosure and access disputes it was easy for arguments over rights to the land to merge with ongoing resentments at the Game Laws and the act of secondary enclosure contained within the modern preserve. Another article in the Liberal supporting *Westminster Review* made the point well. In 'More Facts About the Working of the Game Laws', William Routh noted how 'People that live in towns are ... genuinely interested in land questions ... and, among other moot points, this question of game preserving of course takes its place.'⁷⁶ Describing the game preserve as the 'sacred enclosure', the author went on to present a land where free

⁷⁵ George Shaw Lefevre, 'The Game Laws' in *Land Questions: Collected Essays* (London, 1881), 231.

⁷⁶ William Routh, 'More Facts About the Working of the Game Laws', *Westminster Review*, January 1894, 373.

movement was circumscribed and where clashes with gamekeepers were inevitable.⁷⁷ Although many rural areas were not host to game preserves and the sight of a keeper was correspondingly rare, the idea of a closed countryside was certainly now a pervasive one.

Not only was there enough practical experience of access barred to carry the weight of this perception, it went far beyond the more strictly preserved areas of the southern and eastern counties. With the expansion of grouse shooting on the northern moors coinciding with a new level of demand for access to the same open spaces, conflict was inevitable as a disparate group of cyclists, ramblers and amateur naturalists confronted an array of legal and physical barriers. Focusing on the ‘quarrel over the countryside’ in the north of England and Scotland, the environmental historian, T.C. Smout, has argued that the ‘whole business of access flared up around 1880 with the growing importance of sporting estates’.⁷⁸ Making bitterly ironic use of the term ‘sacred’, the ornithologist Charles Dixon recorded how the Yorkshire the moors were ‘jealously guarded ... Keepers are ever on the look-out to warn intruders off the sacred breeding grounds of the red grouse; the hillsides and plains are systematically swept by the keeper’s telescope in the quest for trespassers’.⁷⁹

Through experiences like the above we have the basis of what we might term the ‘trespass affray’ – a developing feature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries as the mutually antagonistic forces of the game preserver and countryside recreationalist came ever more into conflict. Influenced by Blatchford and the writings of Edward Carpenter, G.H.B Ward established the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers with the clear intention of challenging game preservers in the Peak District. Contained within this mission was the readiness to embrace, and even celebrate, the act of trespass. Developing their own code of conduct, Ward and his followers turned trespassing into a form of ‘sport’ where ‘the rambler entered a battle of wits with the gamekeeper’ and employed ‘superior guile’ to win the day.⁸⁰ This conflict impacted significantly upon the idea of the poacher, a figure whose actions represented physical and legal

⁷⁷ Ibid., 376-78.

⁷⁸ Smout, *Nature Contested*, 151.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Done and Muir, ‘Landscape History’, 199.

⁸⁰ Helen Walker, ‘The Outdoor Movement in England and Wales, 1900-1939’, (D.Phil thesis, Sussex, 1987), 130. On Ward see Melanie Tebbutt, ‘Rambling and Manly Identity in Derbyshire’s Dark Peak, 1880s-1920s’, *Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 1125-53.

boundaries challenged and contested space occupied. Suggestively here, ramblers of the time wore coats lined with ‘poacher’s pockets’. With sites like Kinder Scout already well known for its aggressive gamekeepers, the idea of the poacher’s determined efforts to gain access to ‘forbidden’ land gained further weight.⁸¹ Ward would later write a song about the joys of trespassing to be sung to the tune of ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’, its chorus ran ‘Oh tis our delight, be it storm or bright, to wander anywhere’.⁸²

The Trespass Affray and the Poacher

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a time-travelling anthropologist from the future experienced the limitations that the strict preservation of game could impose on visitors to the countryside. Under the guidance of a gentleman civil servant, Philip Christy, the incredulous Bertram Ingledew has made plain to him the consequences that could follow if the woodland which had taken his fancy were to be entered. ‘You’ll have the keepers after you in a minute’, claims Christy, ‘They’re down upon anybody who disturbs the pheasants’.⁸³ It is not long before the landowner himself appears. ‘Boiling’ with anger, the rack-renting game preserver denounces Ingledew as ‘one of these damned land-nationalising radicals’ and threatens him with a charge of assault.⁸⁴ The encounter was of course a fiction, produced in this case by the Canadian-born Grant Allen. Time-travelling aliens aside, conflicts such as this would not have struck Allen’s readers as particularly implausible.⁸⁵ In such a context the ‘game-bagging, poacher shooting, trespasser-pounding, footpath-stopping, common-enclosing’ squire described in 1831 by Thomas Love Peacock had his position in popular demonology strongly reaffirmed, just as the poacher and his actions acquired a new degree of validation.⁸⁶ After all, poaching was not just about taking game, it was about trespassing on private

⁸¹ Eric Byne and Geoffrey Sutton, *High Peak: The Story of Walking and Climbing in the Peak District* (London, 1966), 42, 70.

⁸² See ‘The Trespasser’s Song’, quoted in David Hollett, *The Pioneer Ramblers, 1850-1940* (Rambler’s Association, North Wales), 104-5.

⁸³ Grant Allen, *The British Barbarians* (London, 1895), 27-28.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 29-33.

⁸⁵ In the 1890s a real life ‘alien’, the Russian geographer and political theorist, Peter Kropotkin, made a journey from London to Sussex and claimed to find a countryside dominated by ‘pheasant-shooting grounds’. P. Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (London, 1906, first publ. 1898), 47.

⁸⁶ Thomas Love Peacock, *Crotchet Castle* (London, 1964, first publ. 1831), 24.

property in order to do so. If the physical barriers enclosing land into private hands ‘signified’, so too did the act of breaking them.⁸⁷

Reporting in January 1930 on the fiftieth anniversary of the literary gentleman’s walking club, the Sunday Tramps, *The Times* described how its early members ‘discreetly trespassed on the game preserves of the aristocracy’ and had even worked out a routine to deal with any gamekeeper who might confront them.⁸⁸ However, the Tramps did not fall into trespass out of necessity or ignorance, they trespassed out of the pleasure to be had from it. According to the club’s founder, Leslie Stephen, ‘I looked out for notices that trespassers would be prosecuted. That gave a strong presumption that the trespass must have some attraction’.⁸⁹ For men like Stephen, an obvious place to trespass was in the wooded areas given over to game preserving. In his illustrated guide to rural England (1881), L.G Seguin noted an abundance of ‘woodland districts’ that remained ‘clothed in a perpetual atmosphere of romance and mystery.’⁹⁰ At the same time, such alluring spaces were likely to be private property and to penetrate them ‘We enter our wood ... somewhat after the fashion of the poacher’. ‘Why’, continued the author, ‘is it always so pleasant to do things in an illegal or forbidden fashion?’⁹¹ Seguin might have found part of his answer in the words of the libertarian philosopher and land preservationist, Auberon Herbert. Drawn like many others to the ‘historical character’ of the nation’s woodland, Herbert saw in such places the ‘England of the outlaw, of the singer of ballads, of the lover of the greenwood life’.⁹² In other words he saw Robin Hood and his kind, which is also to say he saw poachers.

Beyond the rural community itself, this powerfully transgressive aspect of poaching had the potential to draw support from a range of pro-access interests. As a recent discussion of Victorian ‘environmentality’ has noted, despite its innocent appearance when compared to ‘the gravity of enclosures and arrests for poaching’, the growth in

⁸⁷ Blomley, ‘Private Property’, 5; C. Griffin, *Protest*, 84.

⁸⁸ Howard Hill, *Freedom to Roam: The Struggle for Access to Britain’s Moors and Mountains* (Ashbourne, 1980), 18.

⁸⁹ Leslie Stephen, *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. iii (London 1902), 276.

⁹⁰ L.G. Seguin, *Rural England: Loiterings along the Lanes, the Common-sides, and the Meadow-paths with Peeps into the Halls, Farms, and Cottages* (London, 1881), 58.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹² Quoted in Readman, *Preserving*, 204.

organised rambling ‘can be related to broader debates over rural entitlements’.⁹³ And for many who wished to get closer to the land ‘the true heroes’, suggests Antony Taylor, were the poachers ‘whose exploits were applauded as symbols of a stubborn, rebellious primitivism opposed to the fencing off of the earth by aristocrats and monarchs’.⁹⁴ Such sentiments were clearly articulated by Edward Carpenter in his 1889 collection of essays, *Civilisation Its Cause and Cure*:

[W]hen, as to-day, Society rests on private property in land, its counter-ideal is the poacher. If you go in the company of the county squire-archy and listen to the after-dinner talk you will soon think the poacher a combination of all human and diabolic vices; yet I have known a good many poachers, and either have been very lucky in my specimens or singularly prejudiced in their favour, for I have always found them very good fellows.⁹⁵

An added attraction of the poacher for intellectuals of a radical bent like Carpenter was that he could be presented as both a man of above average intelligence and as a potential tribune of the people. Here we might recall John Bedford Leno’s Buckinghamshire poacher, Phil Harris, from Chapter One. Such a framing could also follow from a more conservative position where poaching became a defence or assertion of apparently traditional rights and practices. Before the Hammonds’ evocative account of him, the poacher as Village Hampden was already becoming an established representational theme. In 1880 J.J. Manley complained bitterly that poachers are ‘rendered bolder every year by the circulation of pamphlets and speeches in which their calling is described as a kind of honourable guerrilla warfare’.⁹⁶ To confirm Manley’s point, early the following decade the *Labour Leader* was describing the poacher as ‘a real man ... the embodiment of the revolt against the hideous serfdom that is forced upon the slaves of the soil.’⁹⁷

Less dramatically the poacher was often to be found employing his knowledge of court procedure when appearing before the magistrates. Not only was this recorded by writers on poaching like Richard Jefferies and John Watson, it was commonly noted in the

⁹³ William Taylor, ‘The Culture of “Environmentalism” and the Exceptionality of the Countryside’ in Martin Hewitt (ed.), *The Victorian World* (Abingdon, 2012), 270.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Lords*, 94.

⁹⁵ Edward Carpenter, *Civilisation Its Cause and Its Cure* (London, 1889), 101-2. By 1912 the book was in its twelfth edition.

⁹⁶ J. J. Manley, *Notes on Game and Game Shooting* (London, 1880), 133.

⁹⁷ *Labour Leader*, 28th November 1891. In William Mackay’s 1885 novel, *Beside Still Waters*, we meet ‘Hoppy’ Molt – a ‘philosophical’ poacher and avid reader of a publication that bears a striking resemblance to *Reynolds’ Newspaper*. Mackay, 10-14.

regional press, which in turn was scoured by the national dailies and weeklies in search of good copy. Henry Labouchere's *Truth* got much of its material on Game Law related 'justices' justice' in this way.⁹⁸ Thanks to the work of Tracy Young on the continuing importance of customary rights in rural England, we have a useful sample of these locally documented poaching cases. In the summer of 1897 we find the *Northampton Mercury* reporting on William Day who in reply to a charge of trespass in pursuit of game told the court that 'it was his right to be there. He did love a bit of sport, and would have it as long as he could walk.' Four years earlier in Aylsbury in Buckinghamshire a man accused by a gamekeeper of poaching on nearby Coombe Hill defiantly asked 'how is it I am not allowed to go on Coombe Hill?', to which the assembled crowd joined in with the shout of 'they can't be stopped' [sic].⁹⁹ But it is to the neighbouring county of Hertfordshire that we must now turn in our consideration of the poacher's growing connection in the public mind to the politics of the land.

The Aldbury Poachers and *Marcella*

The case of the Aldbury poachers brings together a number of themes to do with game preserving and poaching in late Victorian England. It also fed directly into the work of the best-selling writer and philanthropist, Mrs Humphry Ward, whose 1894 novel, *Marcella*, drew heavily on the incident. Exemplifying Cannadine's point about 'reality' and representation, we find a real-life poaching affray from an otherwise obscure rural district coming to have multiple lives at the level of representation with the fictional account it inspired itself becoming a news story. Remarking on the stir caused by the book's release, the *Speaker* claimed how

From the first page to the last it is steeped in the atmosphere of the present day ... Whether in London or the country, in a nobleman's mansion or a poacher's cottage, it is the England of to-day that is presented to us, and, as a picture of our time ... will have a distinct value of its own, long after the reading world has ceased to trouble itself with the fiction of the Victorian era.¹⁰⁰

The case might also be seen as both forward and backward looking in that it simultaneously reveals what the *Sunday Times* disparagingly referred to as the

⁹⁸ Marjorie Jones, *Justice and Journalism* (Chichester, 1974), ch. 3.

⁹⁹ Tracey Young, 'Popular Attitudes Towards Rural Customs and Rights in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England' (PhD thesis, Hertfordshire, 2008) 186, 192, 226.

¹⁰⁰ *Speaker*, 14th April 1894, 420.

continuing appeal of 'Newgate Calendar literature', whilst highlighting the growing trend towards 're-trial by newspaper'.¹⁰¹

As well as representing the developing politics of the Land Question and the land-game nexus, the story of the Aldbury poachers also worked as a classic example of Game Law melodrama. Briefly, the case centred on the killing of two keepers during a night time struggle with three poachers in Aldbury Nowers woods in December 1891. The land formed part of the Stocks estate belonging to the widow of a Conservative MP. However, as was increasingly common, the shooting rights were let to a neighbouring landowner. With its abundance of game preserves and close proximity to London, Hertfordshire had become one of the most heavily kept parts of the country. Within days of the crime being discovered, Frederick Eggleton, Charles Rayner and William Smith were apprehended and charged with wilful murder. *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* gave a typically graphic account of the killings by the 'murderous and desperate gang'.¹⁰² The three were committed for trial the following February where the defence argued that it was the keepers who had initiated the struggle. A split jury eventually found Eggleton and Rayner to be guilty of murder and Smith of manslaughter. Eggleton and Rayner were sentenced to death and Smith to twenty years' hard labour.

Although in many ways the case was typical of its kind, on this occasion the fate of the condemned men became something of a cause célèbre. Aside from generating the usual petitions, the case was taken up by the writer and humanitarian, Robert Buchanan, whose 1886 stage adaptation of *Tom Jones (Sophia)* had presented the poaching gamekeeper, Black George, in an openly sympathetic way.¹⁰³ It also drew the attention of Alfred Wallace as well as the more radical press.¹⁰⁴ Making full use of terms like 'feudal' and the idea of the Norman Yoke, the 'Northumbrian' column in *Reynolds' Newspaper* claimed how the poacher had been created by the Normans and that poaching was therefore 'inherent in every Englishman' who naturally sought the game 'which formerly belonged to the people.'¹⁰⁵ In the days preceding the pair's execution, angry exchanges took place in the Commons with a number of sharply worded

¹⁰¹ *Sunday Times*, 20th March 1892.

¹⁰² *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 20th December 1890.

¹⁰³ Robert Buchanan, *Sophia* (LCP, Add. MS 533563).

¹⁰⁴ Hopkins, *Long Affray*, 278-80. And see the *Daily News* 14th and 15th March, 1892.

¹⁰⁵ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 28th February 1892.

questions directed to the Conservative Home Secretary, Henry Matthews.¹⁰⁶ Having become the new occupier of Stocks in the summer of 1892, from where the bulk of *Marcella* was planned and written, Ward later recalled:

Naturally such an event had struck deep into the feeling of the village and the neighbourhood. In the country houses near, no less than in the cottages, the trial and the agitation for reprieve were eagerly discussed; the game-laws and game-preserving in general came up for chastisement in the Radical newspapers, where the murderers were excused as poor men poaching for food, while the Tories, dismissing the hunger excuse with scorn, and declaring that the game was being stolen to sell ... regarded the murder as merely a sordid and brutal example of a sordid and brutal form of crime.¹⁰⁷

Following Eggleton and Rayner's execution in March, the press were roused to new heights of indignation against 'Matthews the Butcher'.¹⁰⁸ Describing how once again the blood of men stained 'the red pages of game law legislation', a leading article in the *Daily Chronicle* went on to record the dire consequences of the 'worship of the hare and the pheasant and the partridge' for the 'mass of the people.' The piece also quoted the most famous lines of 'The Poacher's Widow'.¹⁰⁹ Although some mention was made of the two dead gamekeepers, the focus was invariably on the fate of the two poachers – the inevitable victims of an ill-matched struggle between the ordinary labouring man and the established forces of law and order.

What is particularly striking about these interventions, however, are the ways in which they suggest a new framework for thinking about the Game Laws. First are the references to the potential power of the vote. 'If a mass vote of the people of England could be taken in the matter', declared the *Chronicle*, the death of the two poachers would 'unhesitatingly be called a legal murder', whilst for *Reynolds' Newspaper* the electors of Matthews' Birmingham constituency needed to be more fully acquainted with 'the facts' so that the 'poacher-hanger' was not again returned to office.¹¹⁰ In defending the Home Secretary's decision to uphold the original sentence, even the *Sunday Times* conceded that to have done the reverse 'would have been a politically popular act.'¹¹¹ Much of the talk on the Game Laws between the politically engaged younger characters in *Marcella* is similarly informed by the sense of how greater

¹⁰⁶ *Hansard*, Fourth Series, 16th March, 1892, 1028-32.

¹⁰⁷ Ward, *Marcella*, Appendix A, 545. On the writing and reception of *Marcella* see John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-Eminent Edwardian* (Oxford, 1991), 140-49.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, *Marcella*, Appendix F, 583.

¹⁰⁹ *Daily Chronicle*, 17th March 1892. And see *Truth*, 24th March 1892

¹¹⁰ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 27th March 1892.

¹¹¹ *Sunday Times*, 20th March 1892.

enfranchisement was changing the terms of the debate. Self-confessed Venturists (Fabians) like the eponymous heroine see them as wholly incompatible with the growth of modern society and therefore as 'one of the obvious crying abuses to be attacked first'.¹¹² Marcella's fellow member of the Venturist Society, the self-serving Lincolnshire landowner, Harry Wharton, cynically exploits the poaching affray at the heart of story to promote his own political ambitions.

Second is the way in which the incident became emblematic of the wider struggle for the present, and future, control of the land; a struggle informed by a growing conception of the 'political nation' as being a democratic one.¹¹³ According to Ward herself, the case generated a 'good deal of rather hot discussion of the game laws, and of English landlordism in general'.¹¹⁴ In the novel that followed, the author has a character observe how 'all this game business is, of course, a mere incident of the general land and property system.'¹¹⁵ For Jim Hurd, the poacher who will hang for the killing of a gamekeeper, to poach was not just a means of obtaining extra food for his wife and sick child, or of getting a bit of illicit sport. More importantly, it was an assertion of personal freedom and collective right. As Hurd, who has taken to reading the literature given to him by the evangelising Marcella, muses in the silence of a night-time poaching expedition:

As towards the rich and the law, he had the morals of the slave, who does not feel that he has had any part in making the rules he is expected to keep ... He had always thought 'them rich people took advantage of yer' [sic]... The poor were downtrodden but they were coming to their rights. The land and its creatures were for the people! Not for the idle rich.¹¹⁶

Consciously or not, this clearly echoes the *Daily Chronicle's* impassioned words on the day of the execution of the Aldbury poachers two years before:

The rope is round the necks of the last victims of landlordism in its most odious form ... Imagine the 'caddies' on a golf-ground armed with guns and bludgeons to keep off unlicensed intruders on a favoured 'links'! Yet this is practically what the worship of the hare and the pheasant and the partridge means for the mass of the people of this country, 'warned off', at peril of their lives or liberties, from the soil, the water, the woods, and the forests of what in pleasant irony is called their native land. After-all, what is poaching but a rough, non-legal assertion of the people's right to the land of their birth?¹¹⁷

¹¹² *Edinburgh Review*, July 1894, 118; Ward, *Marcella*, 174.

¹¹³ Readman, *Land*, 207.

¹¹⁴ Mrs Humphry Ward, *A Writer's Recollections* (London, 1918), 141.

¹¹⁵ Ward, *Marcella*, 176.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹⁷ *Daily Chronicle*, 17th March 1892.

However, if the ‘burning question of the game’ still remained, albeit now allied to the growing one of the land, by the time of *Marcella*’s much heralded appearance in print, recorded incidences of poaching were in decline.¹¹⁸ This in turn would have significant implications for the ways in which the poacher might be represented. We shall consider this further in the chapter that follows. But for now we need briefly to survey the nature of late-Victorian poaching and the possible reasons for its apparently diminishing presence on the rural crime sheet.

Poaching and its Decline in Late-Victorian England

According to the official figures, by the end of the Victorian era poaching was a notably diminishing form of crime [see Appendix 2]. Allowing for the difficulties of recording and measurement, historians are in general agreement that the statistics are broadly in line with the reality on the ground. Although various reasons have been suggested for this development, it is important to note that what was apparently happening in terms of poaching was part of a wider downward trend in recorded crime across the country.¹¹⁹ By the start of the twentieth century, observes Clive Emsley, there was a ‘broad feeling of satisfaction about the pattern and the direction of crime.’¹²⁰ It therefore follows that factors promoting a general reduction in criminal activity were also acting upon the incidence of poaching. Specifically here we might note improvements in policing, rising standards of living amongst the poorest sections of society, and a so-called ‘reformation in manners’.

There seems to be little doubt that the expansion and improvement of rural constabularies in the wake of the County Borough and Police Act (1856), played an important role in the reduction of poaching. If in some cases remaining an object of dislike and distrust, the rural police slowly gained in legitimacy and would ultimately do much towards making the countryside a more peaceable and law-abiding place.¹²¹ Although remaining a considerable source of local friction, by drawing the police directly into the struggle against poaching, the Act of 1862 also contributed to poaching’s overall reduction. If the number of convictions under the Poaching

¹¹⁸ *Edinburgh Review*, July 1894, 118.

¹¹⁹ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 41; D. Taylor, *Crime*, 42-46.

¹²⁰ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 19-20.

¹²¹ Digby, ‘Local State’ in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History*, 1457-1464.

Prevention Act remained at a more or less constant level [see Appendix 2], its effectiveness as a deterrent should not be overlooked. The marked decline in opportunistic daytime poaching, which usually involved the taking of rabbits, might in part be linked to the fear of being stopped and searched by the local police. Drawing on his evidence to the 1873 Select Committee on the Game Laws, Joseph Arch graphically recalled how the Act created ‘so many Jacks-in-the-Box ... set free to spring out on the labourer, from the hedge, or the ditch, or the copse, or the field.’¹²²

Also taken to be significant are the gradual rise in living standards and a developing, if ‘intangible’, culture of ‘respectability and law-abidingness’ – though given the widespread feeling that poaching was neither a criminal or moral offence this latter point needs to be treated with some caution.¹²³ In terms of living standards, however, there appears to be a much less doubtful relationship between improving domestic budgets and reductions in poaching activity. Given that the great majority of poachers were agricultural labourers operating within their own localities, the link between poaching and subsistence was of some importance. Indeed, one leading historian of rural England sees growing real wages as the single most important reason for poaching’s decline as ‘for the first time in their lives many labourers had the chance to buy “butcher’s meat.”’¹²⁴ It is perhaps ironic that the emergence in the 1870s of a globalised market in food, a development which did much to undermine the English rural economy, helped to improve the average labourer’s diet by making imported mutton and beef (and even rabbits) more cheaply available.¹²⁵

Financial security might further be improved through membership of a local benefit society (sometimes made contingent on refraining from excessive drinking or poaching), or by the holding of an allotment.¹²⁶ Now subject to expanding legislative provision, allotments had long been regarded as an effective counter to the temptations of poaching – a view that was confirmed by investigators acting for the Royal

¹²² Joseph Arch, *From Ploughtail to Parliament: An Autobiography* (London 1986, first publ. 1898), 148-50.

¹²³ J.P.D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1974), 63-64; Jones, ‘Poacher’, 860.

¹²⁴ Howkins, ‘Economic Crime’, 286.

¹²⁵ John Burnett, ‘Country Diet’, in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside*, vol. ii (London, 1981), 562-65.

¹²⁶ BPP, C.6894-III, 1893, Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labourer*, Report by Arthur Wilson Fox, 166.

Commission on Labour appointed in the early 1890s.¹²⁷ Although many of its findings were subject to challenge, and care should be taken not to overlook continuing hardships, the Commission was confident in concluding that over the previous 15 years the ‘general condition’ of agricultural labourers in most parts of England had perceptibly ‘improved.’¹²⁸ Demographic changes fostered by continuing out-migration from rural areas might also have impacted upon levels of poaching. First, by reducing the competition for available paid employment; and second, by removing many of the younger, more active, men who traditionally accounted for a large percentage of those prosecuted for offences against the Game Laws.

Another factor contributing to poaching’s decline were the actions of game preservers themselves. Aside from engaging more keepers, and using their position on the Bench to prosecute the poaching cases brought before them, the more active game preserving landowners also resorted to the formation of mutual protection associations. Although examples of these are traceable to the eighteenth century, the 1890s witnessed a clear revival of interest in such bodies.¹²⁹ In 1891 the Stratford-upon-Avon Game Association was established, whilst more significantly in 1896 the Norfolk Poaching Prevention Society was formed with the Earl of Leicester agreeing to act as president.¹³⁰ The following year the Essex Poaching Prevention Society was founded under the presidency of the Earl of Warwick, and in 1900 the Norfolk association merged with its Suffolk counterpart to form the Norfolk and Suffolk Poaching Prevention Society (in 1905 this incorporated a Cambridgeshire-based group to become the East Anglian Game Protection Society).¹³¹ By 1909 the Chief Constable for Cambridgeshire was claiming that the preventative work of the Society had directly led to falling numbers of poaching prosecutions.¹³²

¹²⁷ John E. Archer, ‘The Nineteenth-Century Allotment: Half an Acre and Row’, *Economic History Review*, 50 (1997), 28-9; BPP, Wilson Fox, 37; BPP, C.6894-I, 1893, Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labour*, Report by Cecil M. Chapman, 52.

¹²⁸ Nicola Verdon, ‘The state of the rural poor. The agricultural labourer and the Royal Commission on Labour in 1890s England’ in Nadine Vivier (ed.), *The Golden Age of State Enquiries* (Turnhout, 2014), 167.

¹²⁹ McKenzie, ‘Field Sports’, 179-80.

¹³⁰ Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon Game Association, 1891-1913, DR325/2225; NRO, East Anglian Game Protection Society, Minute Book, 1895-1900, SO167.

¹³¹ Essex Poaching Prevention Society, *Rules and Regulations with Instructions* (Maldon, 1897); NRO, SO167, 21st April 1900, 26th January 1901, 28th April 1905.

¹³² McKenzie, ‘Field Sports’, 179-180.

Aside from co-ordinating the activities of game preservers, and cultivating links with sympathetic chief constables, busy organisations like the NSPPS engaged private detectives, issued various kinds of warning notices, and worked hard to regulate the activities of game dealers and game farmers. Preventing the theft and re-selling of pheasant and partridge eggs also became a major pre-occupation. We might also note the growing amounts of winged and ground game that estate owners brought to the market as a means of both subsidising their sport and possibly turning a profit.

Reporting on one well-run preserve, *Country Life* noted how its proprietor was a man 'who loves his sport, but who is also a keen man of business, and who, while he likes to shoot many pheasants, is not indifferent to the matter of expense or the sale of his birds.'¹³³ Although dealers continued to give preference to un-shot game, the legalisation of the trade in game instituted in 1831 with the intention of undercutting the poacher was now starting to bear fruit.

In accounting for poaching's decline it has also been suggested that a consequence of the 1880 reform was to foster closer co-operation between sporting landlords and tenant farmers.¹³⁴ Interestingly the NSPPS had a policy of not endorsing prosecutions under the Ground Game Act, though whether this was a deliberate concession to farmers in return for their wider support in the preservation of game, or an acknowledgement of the likely complexity of such cases, remains difficult to determine. In a somewhat backhanded way, the Ground Game Act might also have affected levels of recorded poaching by allowing farmers to legally engage poachers to keep down the numbers of hares and rabbits found on their land. Such a practice had been anticipated by Disraeli at the time of the Act's passing and twenty years later it was still the source of much irritation to the *Gamekeeper* whose principal readers were frequently made to 'suffer the mortification of seeing such rascals free to traverse parts of the estate and do pretty well as they liked.'¹³⁵

Finally, a more recent explanation for poaching's late-Victorian decline stresses the statistical importance of the industrialised counties of the Midlands and northern England – areas where the operation of well-organised poaching gangs like the Long

¹³³ *Country Life*, 9th April 1898, 422.

¹³⁴ Jones, 'Poacher', 859.

¹³⁵ *Gamekeeper*, March 1900, 109.

Company had previously been much in evidence. Analysis of the judicial returns between 1862 and 1907 undertaken by Harvey Osborne has shown that the national peak for poaching offences in the 1870s was driven by the disproportionately high levels recorded in these areas. During these years, just seven northern and Midland counties were responsible for a third of all poaching prosecutions.¹³⁶ Consequently, the sharp falls in ‘steam-age’ poaching towards the end of the century as workers on the urban-rural fringe became less inclined to poach, and had less need or opportunity to do so, resulted in significant reductions to the recorded national figure. As well as pointing to increased spending power and widening recreational opportunity, Osborne suggests that game preservation in the North was increasingly centred on remote, and harder to poach, grouse moors. In contrast, pheasant and partridge preserves became ever more concentrated in the depression-hit southern and eastern counties – precisely the areas where poaching levels showed less of a downward trend.

This is not to say that northern poaching ceased to be significant, that gangs no longer operated there, or that grouse moors were not regularly targeted, but at the level of nationally recorded poaching crime Osborne’s work makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of poaching’s nationally recorded decline by emphasising its regional aspects.¹³⁷ A similar point emerges from Young’s research on customary rights in Cambridgeshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. Based on her collation of the available figures, prosecutions against the Game Laws in these areas peaked either in the late 1880s or, in the case of Cambridgeshire, at the end of the following decade.¹³⁸ The extent to which poaching remained firmly embedded in some localities can also be seen in the various reports compiled for the Royal Commission on Labour. In his evidence before an 1893 Home Office committee on habitual criminals, the Chief Constable of Essex recorded how ‘All our worst criminals come from London ... The crimes of local people are usually poaching and larceny.’¹³⁹

By its very nature poaching was an activity difficult to measure and it is likely that a great deal of it continued to go unreported or formally unrecorded. According to Vic

¹³⁶ Osborne, ‘Preservation and Poaching’, 171.

¹³⁷ Ibid., ch. 4.

¹³⁸ Young, ‘Popular Attitudes’, 47-49.

¹³⁹ BPP, C.6894-I, 1893, Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labourer*, Report by William E. Bear, 85; BPP, Chapman, 92-3, 123; BPP, LXXII, 1893-94, *Identification of Habitual Criminals*, 46.

Gatrell's influential study of nineteenth century criminal statistics, crimes regarded as 'less conventionally serious' were more susceptible to changing levels of reporting and prosecution – a tendency that might well have impacted upon official levels of poaching.¹⁴⁰ Writing in his 1899 guide to *Shooting on a Small Income*, a book clearly aimed at the expanding rental market, Charles Walker advised that 'the best keeper is he who will prevent poaching by some other means than having the delinquents up before the magistrates'. In this case, the delivering of a 'good thrashing' was a course of action recommended 'though it is not given to every man ... to be able to beat his fellows'.¹⁴¹ As an alternative to administering their own version of summary justice, for lesser offenders keepers would often make do with the issuing of a warning in return for information as to more serious poaching activity in the area, or otherwise suborn the guilty party into a day's work beating at a shoot.¹⁴²

There also appear to have been clearly established priorities as to which poaching cases were worth pursuing legally. For example, in the New Forest it was the practice to 'seldom prosecute poachers of ground game' even though the 'trapping and shooting of the rabbits that abound on the moors doubtless continues'.¹⁴³ In addition to not bringing prosecutions under the Ground Game Act, the NSPPS also resolved 'not to give instructions for the prosecution of minor offences' (the daytime poaching of rabbits), 'except under exceptional circumstances.'¹⁴⁴ With rabbit numbers rapidly increasing, and with their habit of damaging game coverts a common cause of concern, not pressing too hardly on the occasional poacher of these animals certainly made a degree of practical sense.¹⁴⁵ It also made political sense. Aside from wishing to husband their resources so as to effectively deal with more serious cases of poaching, game preservers were not necessarily insensitive to local sensibilities – a point which may have gained in force following the enfranchisement of rural labourers in the mid-1880s and the creation of elected county and parish councils. 'The squire knows ... that there is a body of

¹⁴⁰ V.A.C. Gatrell, 'The Decline of Theft and Violence in Victorian and Edwardian England' in V.A.C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman and Geoffrey Parker (eds), *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500* (London, 1980), 248.

¹⁴¹ Charles Edward Walker, *Shooting on a Small Income* (London, 1900), 107-08.

¹⁴² David S.D. Jones, *Gamekeeping Past and Present* (Fovant, 2009), 85.

¹⁴³ *Blackwood's Magazine*, November 1901, 661.

¹⁴⁴ NRO, SO167, 14th February 1896.

¹⁴⁵ J. Simpson, *The Wild Rabbit in a New Aspect, Or Rabbit- Warrens That Pay* (Edinburgh, 1895) 6-7; John Martin, 'The wild rabbit: plague, policies and pestilence in England and Wales, 1931-1955', *Agricultural History Review*, 58 (2010), 257-59.

public opinion strongly opposed to the Game Laws', observed Anderson Graham in 1892, and must therefore 'have a very clear case, indeed, before hoping to prosecute a poacher without incurring the inconveniences of unpopularity.'¹⁴⁶

Moreover, despite their heavy representation within the ranks of the county magistracy, and the common (often urban) perception of game-preserving magistrates sitting in harsh judgement upon the local poacher, sporting landowners could not always be sure of getting due satisfaction from the Bench. For example, between 1893 and the end of the century the NSPPS recorded 2181 poaching prosecutions brought before the courts in Norfolk. Of these, no fewer than 372 were dismissed, or seventeen and a half percent of the total.¹⁴⁷ Thus, for some members of the shooting community, overly lenient JPs were as much of a problem as the poacher was. Having let a man off on a romantic whim, the misguided magistrate 'maybe whistles the old Lincolnshire poaching air' complained Lord Walsingham and Sir Ralph Payne Gallwey in their contribution to the popular Badminton series of books on sports and pastimes.¹⁴⁸

Whatever the official numbers suggested, therefore, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century the poacher was still a considerable (if reduced) presence in the life of the English countryside. Although we must allow for a degree of self-interest, the pages of the *Gamekeeper* and the numerous guides to shooting and the Game Laws that were published during these years are full of the continued threat posed by various types of poaching and of the need to tighten, or even extend, the laws. It is worth recording that some of the best known, and eventually most celebrated, English poachers like James Hawker, Frederick Rolfe and the Fox Twins were all active at this time. Detailing the extent of his Hertfordshire estate to Lady Bracknell, Jack Worthing ruefully informs her that 'as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it.'¹⁴⁹ The joke works because it has the suggestion of truth. From the 'sneaking' kind, to the 'full blown professional', to the gang-based 'scum of manufacturing towns', there was still a tangible concern at the continued depredations of poachers and thanks to the work of 'sentimental' and 'idiotic writers' the reluctance of the wider public to

¹⁴⁶ P. Anderson Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (London, 1892), 45.

¹⁴⁷ NRO, SO167, Sixth Annual Report, 28th January 1902.

¹⁴⁸ Lord Walsingham and Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey, *Shooting: Field and Covert* (London, 1892), 300.

¹⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Ernest* (Harlow, 1984, first performed in 1895), 16.

view them less sympathetically.¹⁵⁰ In marked contrast to this apparent indulgence of poaching, an 1899 book on the *The Cost of Sport* warned how

The vicinity of most large cities is, as a rule, fatal to game-preserving on cheap lines. It can, in the ordinary course, only be carried on under such conditions with the co-operation of an army of keepers, each not only able to fight, but to fight in the dark – four o'clock in the morning courage – and this against, perhaps, three times their own number.¹⁵¹

Even though indictable poaching offences more than halved between 1881-5 and 1896-1900 [see Appendix 2], violent affrays between groups of poachers and keepers were not uncommon and between 1880 and 1896 at least seventeen men were killed in such encounters.¹⁵² By the end of the century the *Daily Mail* had joined the established national press in bringing accounts of night-time conflicts to its rapidly expanding suburban readership. However, whilst publications like *Reynolds' Newspaper* focused on these struggles through the prism of the 'cursed Game Laws', elsewhere there was a sense of thrilling moonlit adventure and modern day outlawry which the growing number of illustrated weeklies were keen to represent.¹⁵³ Exploiting continued advances in printing and reproduction techniques, publications like the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* had joined the *Illustrated London News* in establishing a new 'discourse of mechanical objectivity' conveying newsworthy events to an audience that was increasingly able to 'see for themselves' [Fig. 2.4].¹⁵⁴

Beyond its political uses, and enduringly melodramatic appeal, continuing interest in the more violent aspects of poaching also fits neatly with Roslind Crone's claim that with the stabilisation of late-Victorian society the representation of violence was seamlessly appropriated into more 'respectable culture'. With this growing sense of security widely diffused, 'Violence as entertainment became a form of expression across the social spectrum'.¹⁵⁵ In 1895 one of the country's premier music halls, the Oxford, was offering a 'topical' tableaux called 'The Last Grip' in which a poacher is brought to ground by a

¹⁵⁰ *Gamekeeper*, January 1899, 54; Harting, *Rabbit*, 155; *Poachers versus Keepers* (Hertford, 1891), 8-9, 40.

¹⁵¹ G.T. Teasdale Buckell, 'Shooting', in F.G. Aflalo (ed.), *The Cost of Sport* (London, 1899), 5.

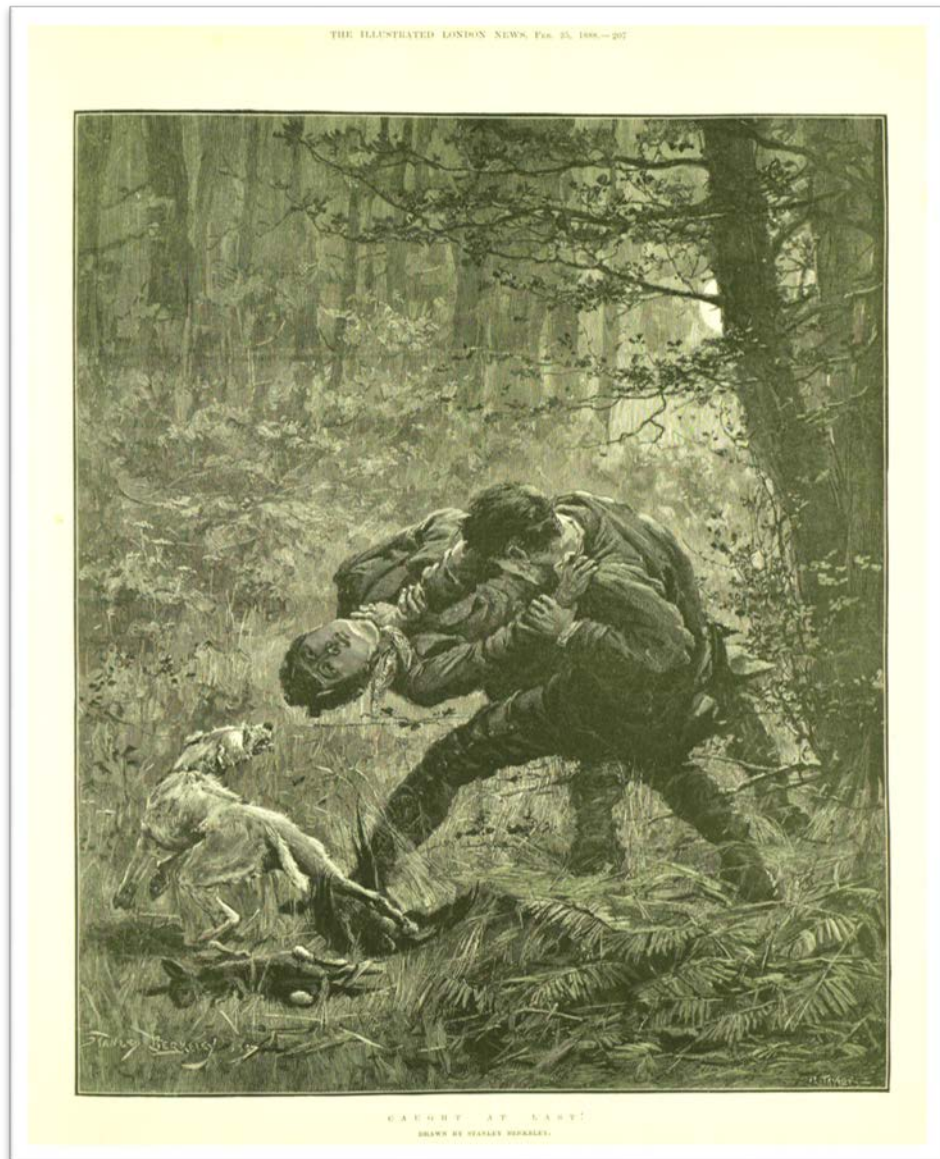
¹⁵² Pamela Horn, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales* (London, 1984), 106.

¹⁵³ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 16th February 1896.

¹⁵⁴ Korda, *Printing and Painting*, 3, 37.

¹⁵⁵ Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 264-68.

determined dog. Five years later, visitors to the London Aquarium could enjoy the live spectacle of ‘Dogs versus Poachers’, though sadly the outcome is not recorded.¹⁵⁶



2.4 ‘Caught at Last’. *Illustrated London News*, 25th February 1888. A poacher and a keeper fight it out in the moonlit woods.

That poaching now appeared as a diminishing threat to law and order, and that in the wider arena ‘the war against criminal disorder was palpably being won by the State’, was important.¹⁵⁷ Clashes between poachers and keepers still occurred, but in the main poaching was becoming a less violent occupation. Analogous in some ways to the highwayman or the smuggler, unlike these other traditionally romanticised criminal

¹⁵⁶ *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, 24th September 1895; *Era*, 28th July 1900.

¹⁵⁷ Gatrell, ‘Decline’, 241.

types the poacher continued to be a part of everyday life, albeit in a more contained and less threatening form. This point also marks the start of a period when ‘crime was almost universally understood and responded to as an urban phenomenon’.¹⁵⁸ As we shall see in the next chapter, in representational terms this was highly significant. That the poacher was not just a figure from a bygone age was essential in keeping him culturally vital; that there was (and was seen to be) increasingly less ‘blood on the game’ mattered too.

¹⁵⁸ Jane Jones, *Challenging the Myth of the ‘Rural Idyll’: A Review Essay of Rural Crime, Disorder and Social Control in Wales and England* (Bangor, 1998), 10.

Chapter Three

Art and Craft: Representations of the Late-Victorian Poacher

[A]ll times are times of transition; but the eighteen-eighties were so in a special sense for the world was at a beginning of a new era ... Even to simple country people the change was apparent.¹

The romance of poaching, and the doubtful ownership of what is in one man's field to-day and in that of another to-morrow, have supplied the man who practises it with a great deal of popular sympathy.²

Poaching must be a very fascinating sport.³

Having established the context within which late-Victorian representations of the poacher were produced, this chapter gives more specific consideration to the nature of the representations themselves and the ways in which they were circulated and consumed. Displaying a clear line of continuity, melodrama and the workings of the Game Laws continued to feature in the representation of poaching, but as the efforts of P.H. Emerson and other celebrants of the rural tradition demonstrate, meanings of the poacher also became broader and deeper. Not only were representations continuing to evolve, but their form and reach were also subject to development as media and communications technology further advanced. Recent work on Victorian print media has recorded how between 1864 and 1887 the number of periodical titles alone rose from 1764 to 3597, whilst between 1881 and 1911 there was a fourfold growth in the readership of newspapers.⁴ The popularisation of the photographic image, alongside further innovations in reproduction and printing technologies, also meant an expanding culture of visibility. Taking in music hall as well as theatre, the first part of the chapter considers the growing presence of the poacher in performance. We then turn to the poacher in image and spectacle, paying particular attention to the role of photography. The chapter concludes with an account of the developing ruralist construction of the English countryside and of the poacher's place within it.

¹ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth, 1973, first publ. 1939), 68.

² R. Kearton, 'The Poacher and his Craft', *Cassell's Family Magazine*, December 1895, 803.

³ Hartop, *Sport*, 117.

⁴ Andrew King and John Plunkett (eds), *Victorian Print Media: A Reader* (Oxford, 2005), 2; Norman Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament* (Athens, Ohio, 1986), 166.

From Melodrama to Knowingness: the Poacher in Performance

Historians of the English stage have often characterised the years between 1880 and 1900 as a time of creative recovery.⁵ Surveying the period in question, Allardyce Nicoll had little hesitation in declaring that compared to preceding decades developments in these years amounted to nothing less than a ‘turn of the tide’.⁶ With the likes of Arthur Pinero, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw establishing their reputations, and with the number of legitimate theatres in London and the provinces continuing to grow, the reasons for thinking this are not hard to find. However, if apparently re-establishing its artistic credentials, the theatre also remained a diverse and genuinely popular form of entertainment. At the heart of this was melodrama. Whatever the claims made by its detractors, via reworked favourites and a regular supply of new works, it retained considerable influence and audience appeal. Operating within a well-established template, the producers of melodrama continually strove to offer the latest in exciting effects and ‘sensation’.⁷ Through combining well-worn narrative themes with technical innovation, as Nicoll himself was forced to concede, the ‘old guard continued to hold its own with the greater public.’⁸

Not only was melodrama a staple source of entertainment on the so-called ‘legitimate’ stage, in the form of one-act sketches it figured frequently on the programmes of the growing number of music halls and variety theatres. Frequently accused of ‘poaching’ on the prerogatives of the legitimate stage by offering dramatic (or comic) sketches to accompany the songs and novelty acts which comprised the rest of the bill, from the public’s point of view they simply offered another way of enjoying live entertainment. In terms of seeing a poacher on the late-Victorian stage, therefore, audiences had a widening range of access points. Moreover, it was not just in a melodrama or a music hall sketch that a poacher could be encountered, he might also be found performing one of the numerous ‘character’ songs that did much to define the image and function of music halls as modern purveyors of the popular ballad tradition. Beginning with stage

⁵ Hugh Hunt, ‘The social and literary context, 1880-1900’ in T.W. Craik (ed.), *The Revels History of English Drama*, vol. vii (London, 1978), 3.

⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama*, vol. v, *Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900* (Cambridge, 1959), 157.

⁷ Mayer, ‘Encountering Melodrama’ in Powell (ed.), *Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, 158-61.

⁸ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 160.

melodrama, it is to representations of the poacher in late nineteenth-century performance that we now turn.

The poacher of the late-Victorian stage was in a number of ways much like that of his predecessor – tending to be on the margins of the main plot but intervening at important moments for good or ill effect. Additionally, though, the poacher of this period might also be a source of comedy in a way less evident than before when the ‘rough melodrama’ of the poaching affray, and the administration of the Game Laws, had cast a much darker shadow. Moving beyond the established practices of melodrama (if not uninfluenced by them), it is telling that by the 1890s both Oscar Wilde and Arthur Pinero were able to make comic use of the poacher. In the latter’s 1893 farce, *The Amazons*, the audience is briefly introduced to the ‘hulking’ poacher Orts. Having unwittingly roughed up an earl and a count, the poacher implausibly claims to have once been a member of the church choir – “singin’ loike a cherrybim” – and to be motivated solely by the desire to support his poor mother.⁹

With rustic settings continuing to be popular (audiences liked to be able to ‘smell’ the hay), and with firm favourites like *East Lynne* the subject of frequent revivals, in one form or another the stage poacher remained a common presence in theatres across the country. Indeed, from the press of the time there comes a strong sense that appearances of the poacher were even tending to increase. Here we might note a reworking from the 1890s of Douglas Jerrold’s celebrated nautical drama, *Black-Eyed Susan*, which now featured a poacher where there had not been one before. Hitherto the character called Gnatbrain, an important figure in delivering the play’s happy outcome, was a part-time waterman and gardener.¹⁰ In the revised version, the freshly-minted poacher not only employs his skills to aid the play’s youthful hero, he is also the source of some welcome light relief.¹¹ On this occasion the part of Gnatbrain was taken by the leading comic actor, Arthur Ricketts. The actor had prior experience of playing amusing poachers and in *The Race of Life* (1888) he had reportedly ‘kept the house in continual laughter.’¹²

⁹ A.W. Pinero, *The Amazons* (London, 1895), 111-13.

¹⁰ J.L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge, 1996), 318-321.

¹¹ Roy Redgrave, *Black-Eyed Susan* (LCP, Add. MS 53659/L); *Era*, 14th May 1898. The original version of the play was first performed in 1829.

¹² *Era*, 1st September 1888. For some other comic poachers see *The Faithful Heart* (*Era* review: 28th August 1881); *A Golden Harvest* (*Stage* review, 6th June 1890).

Within the ‘bodily semiotics’ of melodrama, the poacher also came to have a distinctive ‘look’ of his own.¹³ Partly this was due to the externalising practices of the form, but it was also due to the cheap and easily repeatable way that the poacher could be dressed and made-up. ‘He cannot be too shabbily garbed, and he can always be garbed in the same way’, ran an 1892 article on various types of stage rustic.¹⁴ In a way not previously seen, a common way to judge an actor’s performance as a poacher was to remark on the authenticity of his appearance. Commending James Turner’s work in *The Iron Maiden* (1898), the *Stage* wrote of his ‘realistic rendering of Jem Dagley, a poacher, excellently made up’, whilst in *Round the Ring* at the Surrey Theatre (1891), Reuben Leslie was praised for ‘a picturesque bit of character acting’ as the poacher Rube Bramber, ‘his make-up being decidedly credible.’¹⁵ It had also become an established practice for actors to develop particular ‘lines of business’, or an expertise in playing certain character types. Consequently, the same actors often took the role of the poacher. At the same time, leading writer/actors of the period like Mark Melford would themselves take on the parts they had written, thus further cementing what the poacher was seen to be ‘like’.¹⁶ Reviewing the author’s performance as the ‘odious’ Peter Grundell in his 1884 drama, *The Nightingale*, the *Era* noted Melford’s ‘singularly graphic example of character acting’ which had ‘evidently been accurately studied from life in many of its cleverest details. Dress, gait, and manner were alike a study.’¹⁷

As characters like Grundell suggest, a continuing function of the stage poacher was the playing out of villainy. However, in an already well-established trope, the ‘black’ poacher would not infrequently repent of his action and seek to make amends, often in the form of a dying confession that usually had the effect of lifting the burden of guilt from an otherwise innocent party. Thus, alongside well-established villains like Jonas Hundle, a new generation of murderous and blackmailing poachers could also be enjoyed. In addition to Grundell we have Nat Dicken from the highly successful, *A Dark Secret* (1886), and the suitably named Black Jim from *The Wave of War* (1887).¹⁸

¹³ Juliet John, *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2001), 29.

¹⁴ *Era*, 16th January 1892.

¹⁵ *Stage*, 17th November 1898; *Era*, 7th November 1891.

¹⁶ Booth, *Theatre*, 125-9.

¹⁷ *Era*, 19th July 1884.). Other examples of writers playing their own poachers are Frederick Jarman in *A Golden Harvest* (1890), and Fred Southern in *The Poacher’s Wife* (1894).

¹⁸ *Stage*, 12th December 1881; *Era*, 30th October 1886, 12th July 1896; *Stage* 23rd December 1887.

Guilty of theft, blackmail and murder, according to one reviewer the latter's deeds were 'as dark as his name.'¹⁹

However reprehensible such actions were, it was usually someone from a higher social rank that instigated them. In the 1898 'sensation' drama, *In the Shadow of the Night* (set in 1896), the gamekeeper-turned-poacher, Jake Grudgwell, becomes the hired 'tool' of the villainous Clifford Yorke in his bid to gain control of his uncle's estate.²⁰ The continuing appeal of G.R. Sims' record breaking 1881 country/city melodrama, *Lights o' London*, in which a Yorkshire poacher, Seth Preene, is in league with a similarly treacherous character, had done much to establish the narrative here.²¹ At a time when crusading journalists like W.T. Stead were exposing the sexual exploitation of young girls by their social superiors, the stage poacher of this period - as in the stories of the proliferating 'penny dreadfuls' - was as likely to be the instrument of a criminally-minded gentleman as he was to be involved in a clash with the Game Laws.²² Combining both of these elements we have the popular historical drama *When George Was King*.

Dating from the same year as *In the Shadow of the Night*, and likewise first performed in Lancashire, the play was still touring in the early 1900s.²³ Set in 1765, we first encounter our poacher, Martin Leigh, working the estate of the young squire, Digby Hope. On this occasion, however, Leigh's failure to bag any rabbits triggers a splenetic address full of class loathing:

Missed again. Keepers must be drawn'em before me, damn 'um! 'nough to make a man quit poaching and turn honest. I wonder what t' Master o' Hope if 'a knew Martin Leigh wor nettin' for game in's own avenue. Damn him I hate him! I hate all the rich folk! Why should they be better fed – better clothed – better served nor me ... If they wor to catch me now – taking a few o' their paltry rabbits – they'd shoot me down like a mad cur, ay, and gibbet me nine yards high come morning. Odd. It's a fool's game after all. Risking my neck for a bit of mangy game! [sic].²⁴

¹⁹ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 18th December 1887.

²⁰ James Willard, *In the Shadow of the Night* (LCP, Add. MS 53668/B). The play was still being performed in 1910.

²¹ G.R. Sims (ed. Michael R. Booth), *The Lights o' London and Other Victorian Plays* (Oxford, 1995).

²² For example, the poaching character 'Black Jimmy' in the story 'Lion Hearted Jack'. Serialised in *The Boy's Standard*, 1890-91. See the Barry Ono Collection of Bloods and Penny Dreadfuls, British Library Online.

²³ Lanwarne Hawkins, *The Master of Hope / When George was King* (LCP, Add. MS 53669/D). The play originally went under the first title given.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Expressing sentiments regularly to be found in the pages of *Reynolds' Newspaper*, where the actions of the poacher were often championed, certain audience members would doubtless have thrilled to hear Leigh's denunciation of the rich as 'A parcel o' wine-bibbing, dicing, drabbing fops and queans' [sic].²⁵ At the same time, and as the use of archaic language enforces, Leigh's speech is safely contained within its setting of the past and a time when the Game Laws were much more restrictive.

Nevertheless, Leigh's words still carry a powerful charge and it is through his poaching exploits that he has been privileged to witness the squire's cousin, Mortimer Dugdale, commit murder. Confronting the assailant with his act, Leigh exults in the dramatic reversal of fortunes: 'You sent me to jail once – you had me whipped for a rogue – you once told me if you could catch me poaching you'd hang me. Well, I'm out-a-poaching tonight, I can hang thee.'²⁶ Offered money for his silence, and more if he agrees to help frame Digby for the murder, Leigh throws in his lot with Dugdale. The unholy partners eventually come to blows and the former is stabbed and mortally wounded. With his dying breath Leigh begs for God's mercy and the forgiveness of his sweetheart – actions which do much to mitigate his previous actions. He also confesses to the plot against Digby. Confronted with a mob of angry villagers, a cornered Dugdale takes his own life. The poacher, made victim by circumstance and the much greater criminality of his 'betters', dies redeemed: it is the well-placed Dugdale who is damned. Noting a production of the play in Staffordshire in 1900, the *Stage* felt bound to report that Edward Finlay's performance as the poacher had been 'one of the finest portrayals of a character part ever seen here.'²⁷

But by far the most interesting stage poacher of the period was Jim Kimber from another Mark Melford melodrama, *Flying From Justice* (1890). As with Martin Leigh, Kimber is engaged in the act of poaching when a man is killed. Although completely innocent, the poacher is ruined by his proximity to the crime for which he is now convicted. With his execution imminent, Kimber sends for the son of the man he is supposed to have murdered, a clerical magistrate called Lacarsey (the supposition that Kimber had acted against a traditional enemy of the poacher weighs heavily against

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Stage*, 21st June 1900.

him). Over the course of a lengthy exchange, Kimber convinces John Lacarsey of his innocence and puts the hero on the trail of the real perpetrators. What gives the scene its power, and lasting interest, is Kimber's eloquent defence of poaching. A point added to by its contemporaneous setting. Over the course of various productions of the play, which would prove to be one of Melford's biggest hits, reviewers were quick to single out the potency of Kimber's role with its 'unexaggerated sketch of this child of the open' and 'description of the joys of the poacher's life.'²⁸

One reason for the success of the play was that Melford was a highly capable dramatist steeped in the practices of the period. Beyond this, however, is the specific quality of the lines given to Kimber, a combination perhaps of Melford's own proclivities (he claimed to be something of a poacher himself) and the influence of writers like Jefferies. In bearing and manner of speech, there is an interiority to Kimber unusual for melodrama. Also of course, he stands and falls as a free-spirited poacher – an unlucky victim of circumstance, he is far from being another's 'tool'. With six hours remaining of his life, he turns to Lacarsey:

I'm a strong healthy man now. I'm always widest awake at midnight. I ought to have been born a fox! for poachin' is in my blood. The way to cure a poacher is to give him free leave o' the covers. – Bah! That's farmyard shootin', that is. But to hunt on your hands and knees, to crawl under the nut trees and pick off the pheasant by the light o' the stars, and rouse the distant keeper's kennel to barkin' – to shift yer ground an' burrow like a rabbit among the dead leaves, while the keeper walks over ye, as you lays flat with yer dog's nose in yer fist – that's life! that's sport. To hunt and be hunted at the same time – that's fair! And that's what makes the poacher, not what the poacher makes of it. [sic]²⁹

Here we arrive at one of the classic defences of poaching, and one that would become increasingly evident – the true poacher is not 'made', he is born. The reference to the fox is also significant. A natural 'poacher' itself, for many the animal symbolised the free-spirited and 'carnavalesque ways' of its human counterpart.³⁰ Unlike the broad mass of people who were 'exiled' in their own land, 'The fox by night may roam', wrote Edward Carpenter in one of his popular *Songs for Socialists*.³¹

²⁸ *Stage*, 10th September 1891, 8th December 1892, 18th August 1898. Melford took the part of Kimber in the opening production of the play. *Stage*, 30th May 1890.

²⁹ Mark Melford, *Flying From Justice* (LCP, Add. MS 53451).

³⁰ A. Taylor, *Lords of Misrule*, 86.

³¹ Edward Carpenter, *Songs for Socialists*, 3rd Edition (London, 1890), 28.

Even for upholders of the game preserver's rights, the notion of the inborn instinct to hunt could serve as a justification for the poacher. 'Frequently the village poacher illustrates the doctrines of heredity', avowed Alex Innes Shand, in the *Encyclopaedia of Sport* (1900), 'He was brought up to the trade like his father and grandfather, among nets, wires and lurchers.'³² And as Kimber himself puts it: 'I was always a poacher. My father was a poacher afore me; we used to work together; it's a poor life for what livin' it makes – but that ain't the point, it's the fascination of it' [sic].³³ Four years later in her best-selling novel, *Marcella*, Mrs Humphrey Ward had her own poacher, the ill-starred Jim Hurd, come to the following realisation:

If he could have given words to experience, he would have said that since he began to go out poaching he had burst his prison and found himself. A life that was not merely endurance pulsed in him. The scent of the night woods, the keenness of the night air, the tracks and ways of the wild creatures, the wiles by which he slew them, the talents and charms of his dog Bruno – these things had developed in him new aptitudes both of mind and body, which were in themselves exhilaration.³⁴

Unlike 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', however, both Kimber and Hurd will pay dearly for their night-time delights. A fact that Kimber, the archetypal 'sporting' poacher, is fully reconciled to: 'Jim Kimber, says I – luck's again ye – yer record's again ye, and you've got to die; but not for what you've done, but becos luck's agen ye. An I've put my face to the wall, and I'm going to die' [sic].³⁵

In addition to being a successful dramatist, Melford was also a noted writer for the music hall. Although it has not been possible to locate any poacher-based sketches penned by Melford himself, a variety of poaching characters and themes are nevertheless to be found. Whatever view is taken of the social and ideological function of music halls, there is general agreement that in their number and range - from smaller provincial establishments to metropolitan 'palaces' - they occupied a central place in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century English cultural life. Born 'from below' and initially catering for a largely working-class clientele, by the closing decades of the century the music halls, and the variety theatres which developed out of them, were

³² Alex Innes Shand, 'Poachers and Poaching' in The Earl of Suffolk and Berkshire, Hedley Peak and F.G. Aflalo (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Sport* (London, 1900), 118.

³³ Melford, *Flying*.

³⁴ Ward, *Marcella*, 153.

³⁵ Melford, *Flying*.

regularly entertaining people drawn from all sections of society and had become ‘a genuinely national cultural institution.’³⁶

Even allowing for the capitalisation and growing regulation of the halls, audiences were never passive consumers of a product from whose origins they were detached. Rather, notes Dagmar Kift, in their active responses to whatever was on offer they continued to exercise a degree ‘popular control’ over content and form.³⁷ Dismissed by many in the nascent folk-song collecting movement as worthlessly artificial, for the influential folklorist, Joseph Jacobs, the songs of the music halls were in fact ‘the *Volkslieder* of to-day.’³⁸ In addition to the basic transactions of time and money there was also, insists Peter Bailey, a reciprocal exchange of ‘knowingness’ between performer and audience which created a ‘potent sense of collusion.’³⁹ Focusing largely on the practice of the character-performed music-hall song, Bailey goes on to argue that ‘knowingness as popular discourse’ worked to ‘destabilise the various official knowledges’, and that by the 1890s audiences of all types could ‘savour the collusive but contained mischief of the performer’s address, in whose exchanges they too could register the competencies of knowingness.’⁴⁰ Alongside the playing out of melodrama, which in the form of dramatic sketches was a common part of the music-hall experience, it is ultimately within this context of ‘knowingness’ that the music-hall poacher must also be considered.

Before returning to this idea we should remind ourselves that the stage performance of poaching-themed songs was already well established in ‘playhouses’ and early music halls. As we saw in Chapter One, in the more refined world of the concert hall they were also part of the standard repertoire. Moving into the 1880s, Elizabeth Philps’ musical rendering of ‘The Poacher’s Widow’ was still to be heard at St. James’ Hall, whilst J.L. Hatton’s (‘Zummersetshire’) version of ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’ bears the British Museum stamp of 1883 [Fig. 3.1].⁴¹

³⁶ Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian music hall. Culture, class and conflict* (Cambridge, 1996), 2; Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914* (Manchester, 1987), 86.

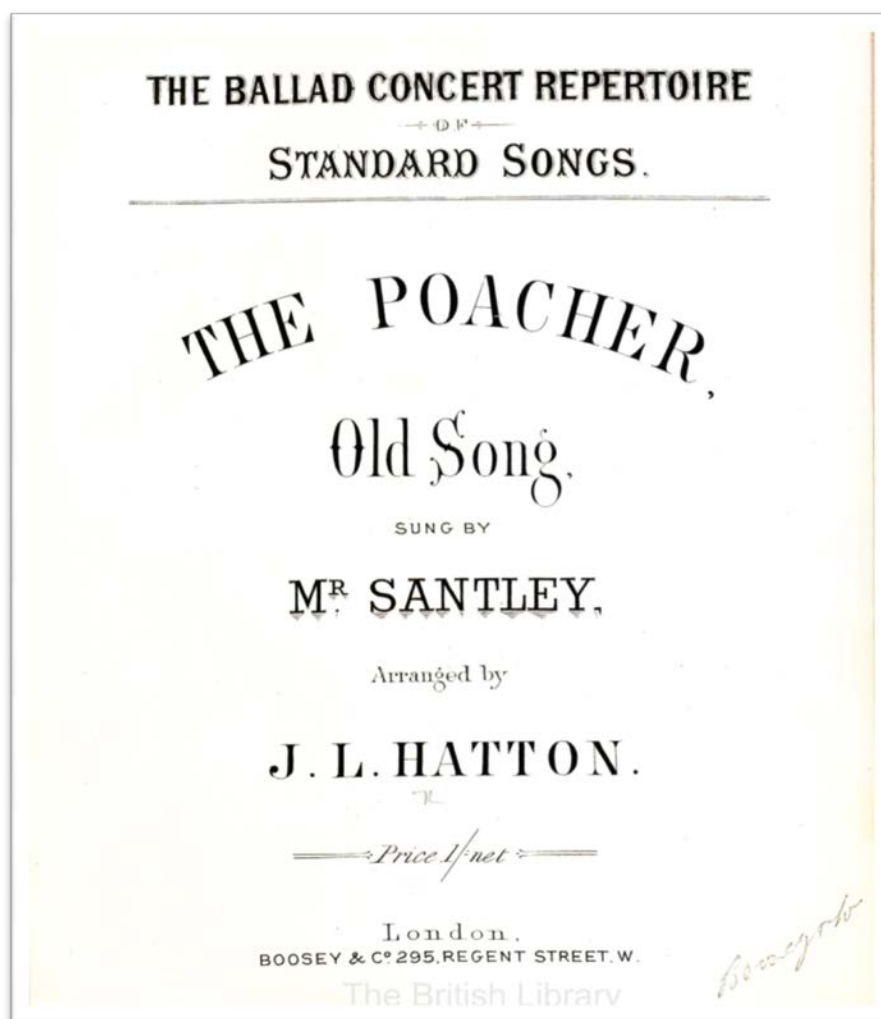
³⁷ Kift, *music hall*, 4-5.

³⁸ Quoted in Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester, 1993), 16.

³⁹ Peter Bailey, ‘Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture’, *Past & Present*, 144 (1994), 150.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155, 167.

⁴¹ *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 21st May 1882; J.L. Hatton, ‘The Poacher – Old Song’ (London, 1883).



3.1 Boosey and Co. was a leading publisher of nineteenth-century sheet music and in the 1860s established the London Ballad Concerts at St. James' Hall. It was at this venue that Elizabeth Philp and others regularly performed 'The Poacher's Widow'. Image courtesy of the British Library.

Other poaching songs from around this time include Hermann Smith's 'The Poacher'. An original composition with music by Henry Wood, it was designed for both domestic and public performance.⁴² Although at a cost of four shillings 'The Poacher' would have been prohibitive to most, its publication is again suggestive of the wide cultural reach that the representational poacher had come to have. According to one study of Victorian popular music, 'Publishers who succeeded in reaching the drawing-room audience were certain of a rich haul. Enthusiasts would happily pay out four shillings for the latest ballad'.⁴³ Telling of a 'sly' poacher's night-time adventures - though here a 'dusky' sky is preferred to a moonlit one - we enter a world of outwitted keepers and plump pheasants 'noosed' for the pot. Should he ever be caught the poacher of the song

⁴² Hermann Smith and Henry J. Wood, 'The Poacher' (London, 1888).

⁴³ Ronald Pearsall, *Victorian Popular Music* (Newton Abbot, 1973), 89.

will accept his 'bad luck', but until then 'I lead with wife, / A jolly life, / Whatever the nobbs may say.'⁴⁴ With its gentle anti-authoritarianism wrapped in a comforting sense of timeless rusticity, this was the kind of poacher which even the most respectable audience could warm to – a living embodiment of the Old Ways and of sturdy individualism in the face of modern mass society. In this it is perhaps appropriate that a key figure in the establishment of the Proms should have provided the song's musical setting. Much more accessible for the majority of the population, however, would have been the kind of poacher 'turns' performed in the growing number of music halls and variety theatres – both in London and in the provinces.⁴⁵

Alongside established favourites like 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' - which according to the song collector and antiquarian, Sabine Baring Gould, owed its enduring appeal to the music hall - new songs and 'turns' were also being written and performed specifically for performance in the unique environment of the halls.⁴⁶ In 1889 Tom Robinson was topping the bill at the New Sebright in Hackney as 'The Poacher' and in the following decade Godfrey West, the 'versatile actor-vocalist, the original poacher', was enjoying success at the recently opened Newcastle Palace of Varieties.⁴⁷ Early in the next century one of the top stars of the day, Bert Gilbert, was amusing audiences at London's Coliseum (and elsewhere) with his 'truly comical' turn as a poacher, complete with a mechanical dog.⁴⁸ Although sadly beyond recovery, such spectacles might usefully be seen through Bailey's view of performer/audience 'knowingness' which 'encoded a reworked popular knowledge in an urban world'.⁴⁹ A well-known music-hall performer sharing his character's experiences of poaching with a suitably receptive audience offers a clear example of Bailey's 'culture of competence.' As one of John Watson's popular books on poaching had for its epigraph, it was 'Knowledge never learned in schools'.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Smith and Wood, 'Poacher'.

⁴⁵ *Era*, 27th July 1889, 27th March 1897, 1st April 1899.

⁴⁶ Sabine Baring-Gould, *English Minstrelsie: A National Monument of English Song*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, 1895), 28-9, p.ii of notes. Early in 1897, for example, F.J. Ford was using the pages of the *Era* to advertise his latest performance song, 'The Poachers'. 23rd and 30th January 1897.

⁴⁷ *Era*, 27th July 1889, 23rd January 1897, 30th January 1897, 27th March 1897.

⁴⁸ *Era*, 15th April 1905, *Observer*, 23rd April 1905.

⁴⁹ Bailey, 'Conspiracies', 167.

⁵⁰ John Watson, *Poachers and Poaching* (London, 1891).

Much to the continued annoyance of legitimate stage interests, music hall and variety theatre audiences might also encounter the poacher in the form of the dramatic sketch. Just as the broadside ballads which told of poachers were effectively reconstituted on the music-hall stage, so too was the poaching-based melodrama. Amongst the various sketches that centred on poachers, by far the most popular of the time seems to have been *The Poacher's Wife* by the Fred Southern Company. First performed at the Sebright in East London in 1894, the *Stage* noted how 'of the many little pieces of this kind ... *The Poacher's Wife* ranks among the best.'⁵¹ With the poacher played by Southern himself, the sketch was performed across the country.⁵² Exploiting a well-worn title, and possibly taken from an 1860s Game Law melodrama called *Driven From Home; or, The Poacher's Fate*, it was still going strong come the start of the next century.⁵³ By this time, an alternative version of *The Poacher's Wife* was in circulation, and *The Poacher's Fate* had itself re-emerged on the music hall and variety theatre stage.⁵⁴

If the Game Laws were less to the fore in the poacher representations to be seen on the legitimate stage, this was not the case in the music halls. In addition to the above, an 1893 duologue by Ovid and Cardon, which over a number of months played in various halls in London and elsewhere, makes the point well.⁵⁵ In *The Poacher* the duo's subject became a representative victim of an overly harsh magistracy and the administration of 'justices' justice.' Billed as a 'sensational sketch', for the Conservative leaning *Era* the piece was little more than an ill-informed 'treatise on the game laws' that apparently took no account of the Ground Game Act.⁵⁶ However, in terms of achieving its effect, the same paper felt that such 'inaccuracies matter little to audiences of toilers' who remained 'ready to applaud when the rich man is held up to ignominy.'⁵⁷ For those 'toilers' who applauded *The Poacher*, and who likewise might have enjoyed the tirades of Martin Leigh, the politics had clearly not gone out of the Game Laws.

⁵¹ *Stage*, 8th March 1894. For other poacher-themed sketches see the *Era*, 14th June 1890 and the *Stage*, 16th January 1892, 27th October 1892.

⁵² *Era*, 27th July 1895, 28th September 1895, 28th August 1897, 5th November 1898, 4th February 1899.

⁵³ *Stage*, 18th July 1901.

⁵⁴ *Era*, 24th July 1897, 2nd July 1898.

⁵⁵ *Era*, 29th April 1893, 9th September 1893, 4th November 1893.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29th April 1893.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

New Ways of Seeing the Poacher: Late-Victorian Image and Spectacle

In the same year that Ovid and Cardon were topping the bill, the Royal Academy exhibited *The Poacher's Wife* by the Bedfordshire artist, Arthur C. Cooke [Fig. 3.2]. According to *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, it was a picture full of emotional interest and closely observed detail. For the benefit of its many readers, the paper went on to describe how the wife 'stands half bewildered, as a little girl, sobbing and clinging to her gown, cries for daddy, passing the cottage window between two constables.'⁵⁸ Given its obvious sentimentality and focus on the domestic, the painting stands in a long line of rural genre scenes. At the same time, however, it displays the kind of 'heightened immediacy' that Andrea Korda has traced to the influence of the illustrated press, which in turn 'promoted a more invested way of seeing.'⁵⁹



3.2 *The Poacher's Wife*, Arthur C. Cooke, 1893. Image taken from an illustrated feature on the artist in *Cassell's Magazine*, June-November, 1906. Three generations of women are forced to witness the poacher being taken into custody.

⁵⁸ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 30th April 1893.

⁵⁹ Korda, *Printing and Painting*, 2, 173.

In terms of narrative and style, *The Poacher's Wife* is comparable with *The Poacher's Daughter*, produced in 1884 by the former pupil of Millais, Archibald Stuart Wortley. Like other artists of the day, the aristocratic Wortley combined a successful career as a painter with one as an illustrator, and was also a writer on game shooting [Figs. 3.3 and 3.5].



3.3 *The Poacher's Daughter*, Archibald Stuart Wortley, 1884. Image courtesy of the Usher Gallery, Lincoln.

Both pictures present humble interiors in which some attempt at providing basic comfort and decoration have been made. Poached game is visible in each, although the presence of pheasants in Figure 3.4 indicates a higher order of poaching. Both of these paintings also reflect prevailing notions of masculinity in which the male is the chief breadwinner and protector. In other words, the poacher is a responsible figure mindful of his family. At the same time, the presence of the police (a clear sign of their growing presence in rural areas) suggests that neither of these poaching stories are going to end well and that the poachers are in the process of becoming 'fallen men' – no longer able to fulfil their primary function of maintaining their loved ones.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Korda, *Printing and Painting*, 118.

The poaching father has obviously been involved in a serious affray with a keeper. Although as a writer on recreational shooting, Stuart-Wortley dismissed the ‘pot-house agitators’ who criticised the Game Laws, we get little of this viewpoint here.⁶¹ If anything, the image cuts the other way and might sit comfortably alongside the words of Kingsley. In *The Poacher’s Wife* we see much less of the husband, but the scene unfolding beyond the window suggests that he too has been party to an act of poaching-related violence. In fact, we know exactly what the story is thanks to an illustrated feature on Cooke that later appeared in *Cassell’s Magazine* (a re-styled version of *Cassell’s Family Magazine*). Here it was claimed that the work was directly inspired by the Aldbury poaching case when ‘in their desperate determination to get food for their little ones, the poachers killed two keepers.’ In a neat example of representational diffusion, readers were also reminded that ‘This same humble family tragedy is made to figure in “Marcella,” by Mrs Humphry Ward.’⁶² Given what we know of this particular Game Law narrative, *The Poacher’s Wife* will soon become the poacher’s widow.

However, by the time that Cooke’s painting was seen by the public, representations of the poacher were less likely to be found on canvas than in previous decades. In the expanded ‘visual economy’ that image producing - and re-producing - technology had made possible, the poacher was now as likely to be seen in the pages of periodicals and books than he was on the walls of galleries. Not only did this alter the way that the representation could be received, making it more personal and more repeatable, it greatly increased its potential ‘throw’. Emerging media technologies not only fed a mass audience, they created it. According to a recent study of photomechanical reproduction:

Although in one sense the audiences for mass-produced magazines were addressed very much as individual consumers, in another sense these magazines could never be read individually. Each reader was always aware that many others were consuming the same material.⁶³

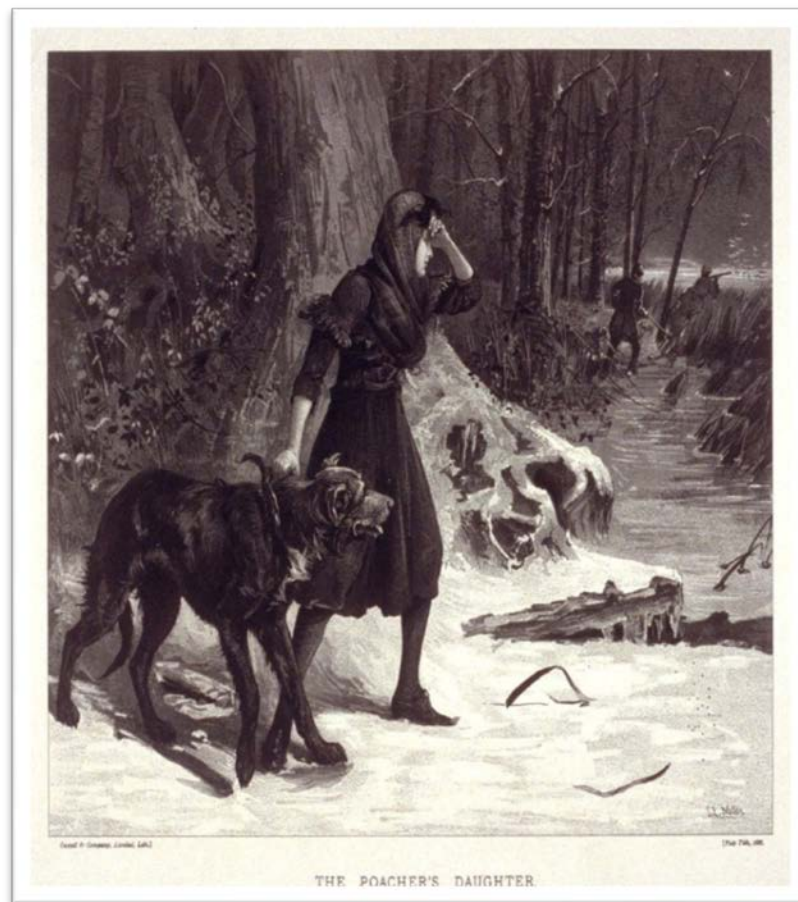
Providing a good example of the above argument, *Cassell’s Family Magazine* included in its 1886 Christmas special its own representation of *The Poacher’s Daughter*. Drawn by the well-known artist and illustrator for *The Graphic*, Samuel Waller, and

⁶¹ A.J. Stuart Wortley, ‘Prince and Peasant, Peer and Pheasant’ in A.E.T. Watson (ed.), *The Pheasant* (London, 1896), 119.

⁶² L. Van Der Veer, ‘The Art of Arthur C. Cooke: Pictures With Stories’, *English Illustrated Magazine*, June-November 1906, 380-81.

⁶³ Gerry Beegan, *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (Basingstoke, 2008), 23.

reproduced as a tinted chromo-lithograph, the image combines both ‘heightened immediacy’ with old-fashioned sentimentality [Fig. 3.4]. With the snowbound woodland providing a seasonal twist, we also have drama as the beautiful, and obviously loyal, daughter (not to say the dog) anxiously watches on as ‘she waits for the report which may bring the keepers to the spot.’⁶⁴ Whatever the rights and wrongs of his actions, by being firmly on the side of the daughter, we again take the side of the poacher.

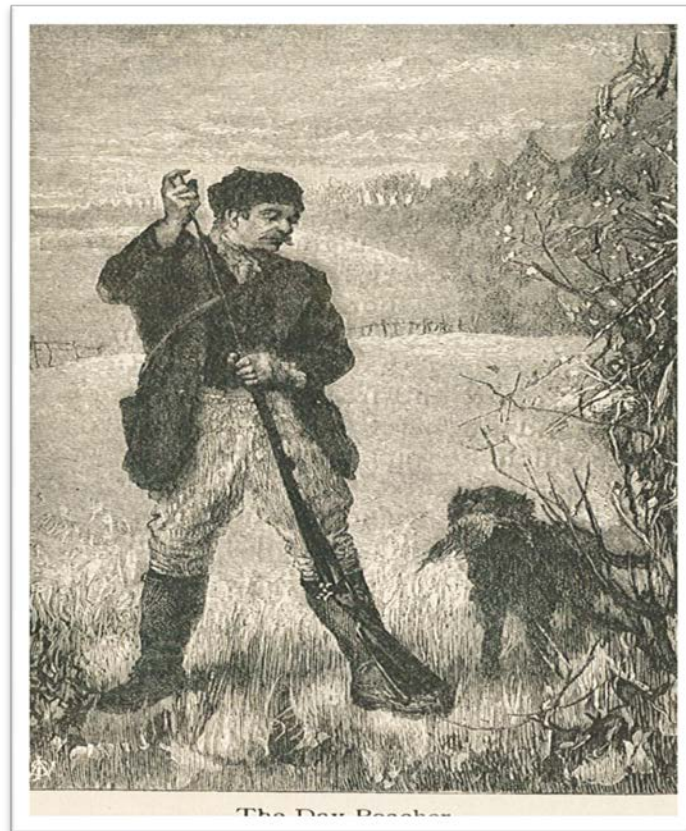


3.4 *The Poacher's Daughter*, S.E. Waller. Published in *Yule-Tide*, 1886.

In thematic concern, *The Poacher's Wife* and *The Poacher's Daughter* (both versions) are less typical of the period than they are to earlier representations of poaching. At the level of representation, the sort of Game Law melodrama that pervades these pictures was largely giving way to the act of poaching itself – although as we can see in Waller's version of *The Poacher's Daughter*, the special relationship between the poacher and his dog remained a frequently iterated theme. Yet allowing as we must for multiple

⁶⁴ *Yule-Tide, Cassell's Christmas Annual*, 1886 (London, 1886), 9.

representations, and exceptions, as well as the re-cycling of earlier works, visual depictions of the poacher were increasingly likely to concern themselves with the art and craft of his particular avocation rather than with conflict and domestic tragedy.⁶⁵ The following image is revealing here. Produced by Stuart Wortley to accompany a successful book on game preserving and shooting, it appears in the section on poaching [Fig. 3.5].



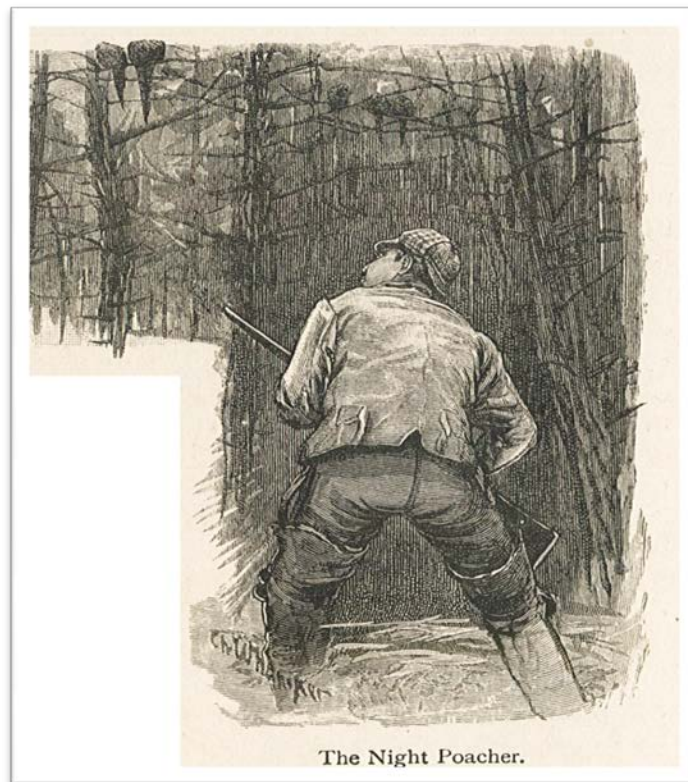
3.5 'The Day Poacher', A.J. Stuart Wortley. Illustration from Walsingham & Payne Gallwey, *Shooting: Field and Covert*, 1892.

Given the book's provenance, a predictably dim view of the poacher is taken and the surrounding text reads: 'His restless, suspicious leer, hollow eyes, alehouse face, and his stooping shambling gait proclaim him at once'.⁶⁶ Yet between the image and the words there is an obvious dissonance. The poacher we see does not tally with the poacher we read. In visual terms, the poacher of this representation is not a figure to be easily dismissed as a 'cowardly, drunken ruffian' whose 'idleness and loafing habits are

⁶⁵ For example, at the Royal Academy's winter exhibition for 1880/81 James Northcote's unflattering painting of *The Poacher* was shown. This particular representation was at least half-a-century old. Northcote died in 1831. *Sunday Times*, 9th January 1881.

⁶⁶ Walsingham and Payne Gallwey, *Shooting*, 301.

habitual.’⁶⁷ Out for a day’s shooting with his own version of a trusty gun dog, he could in fact be seen as a ‘demotic double’ to those legally qualified to take game.⁶⁸ This point is even more evident in Charles Whymper’s depiction of ‘The Night Poacher’ [Fig. 3.6]. Coming later in the same chapter, the image here is very much that of the poacher as an alert and skilful hunter as he sets about shooting pheasants from their roosts under cover of darkness. Together with his illustrations of poachers in Richard Jefferies’ work, Whymper contributed as much as anyone to establishing a visual representation of the poacher as a man of guile and craft.



3.6 ‘The Night Poacher’, Charles Whymper. Illustration from Walsingham & Payne-Gallwey, *Shooting: Field and Covert*, 1892.

As the nineteenth century drew its end, and the life and traditions of an increasingly ‘quiet’ countryside became ever more valorised, there appeared to be less interest in making moral judgements about poaching than there was about trying to document it. An excellent example of this can be found in a widely reported show on Sports and Pastimes staged at the Crystal Palace in the summer of 1893. Since its relocation to Sydenham in the 1850s, the ‘People’s Palace’ had become a popular destination and its

⁶⁷ Ibid., 300.

⁶⁸ Introduction, fn. 30.

wide-ranging programme of concerts, exhibitions and displays drew around 2 million visitors a year.⁶⁹ Alongside other recreations like archery, tennis, golf and fox hunting, one of the show's most prominent attractions was a section devoted to natural history and poaching.⁷⁰ Having launched a public appeal the previous April, the organisers were able to display a wide array of poaching-related artefacts including nets, specially adapted guns, an assortment of mantraps and a waxwork figure of a poacher agonisingly caught in one. A poacher himself had donated his jacket to 'show how his pockets are arranged' and had even offered to appear in person to explain how 'poaching as a profession is carried on.'⁷¹

As reported in *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, the poaching part of the exhibition was presented in a 'telling and realistic way', with even the *Field* conceding that the most interesting part of the entire show was the 'Poaching and Natural History section.'⁷² Although the poaching display had its critics, the line taken here was that it would fail to be 'sanguinolent' enough and would not reveal how the Game Laws were 'a code written to an astonishing extent in human blood.'⁷³ In terms of its location, and its reliance on voluntary donors to provide material, the poaching display might be taken as an unusually participatory, and inverted, example of the period's evolving 'exhibitory complex' where at official level 'the opening up of objects to more public contexts of inspection and visibility' was encouraged in the pursuit of 'moral and cultural regulation'.⁷⁴ Demonstrating Raphael Samuel's conception of 'unofficial knowledge', through the physical acts of gathering and display value was conferred upon the subject. Concluding their own work on nineteenth-century poaching, Osborne and Winstanley see the event as being symptomatic of the way the 'art' of the poacher could be incorporated into the decade's ongoing 'construction of "the rural"'.⁷⁵ With ideas of the rural coming to form an increasingly important aspect in the nation's imaginative geography, there were now plenty of spaces for the poacher to fill.

⁶⁹ Graham Reeves, *The Palace of the People* (Bromley, 1986), 31-39; Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, theory, politics* (London, 1995), 70.

⁷⁰ *Field*, 15th July 1893.

⁷¹ *Field*, 15th July 1893.

⁷² *Ibid.*; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 23rd July 1893.

⁷³ *Sunday Times*, 9th April 1893.

⁷⁴ Bennett, *Museum*, 73. Tim Barringer has questioned the extent to which nineteenth-century museums operated as a form of social control. Barringer, 'Victorian Culture and the Museum: Before and After the White Cube', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11 (2006), 138-39.

⁷⁵ Osborne and Winstanley, 'Rural Urban Poaching', 207-08.

When it came to late-Victorian representations of the poacher, the proliferating number of illustrated magazines might also serve as a virtual exhibition space. Building on Peter Bailey's conception of 'knowingness' in the context of the music hall, Beegan has argued that a key function of such publications, and a major source of their appeal, was that they enabled a 'wide audience to feel that they were "in the know"'.⁷⁶ Moreover, not only was the individual reader privileged in this way, they were self-consciously positioned within a much larger 'interpretive community'. As Beegan puts it, 'The magazine created a body of timely knowledge and also an awareness that this knowledge was shared.'⁷⁷ Attendant upon this was the encouragement of a popular sense of 'curiosity' on all manner of subjects and which lay behind publications like the *English Illustrated Magazine* (launched in 1883).⁷⁸

Typical of the magazine's content was S.L. Bensusan's 1897 account of 'The Poacher' for the regular series on 'How the Other Half Lives'. Here the reader is transported to a spring morning in Kent and comes face to face with a vigorous man in his sixties who has 'something of the old Robin Hood' about him. Taken through the woods, en-route to the local pub for good beer and a hearty breakfast, the author/reader is treated to a highly impressive display of the village poacher's craft. Accompanying this easy-going account were a number of illustrations by Louis Gunnis, a painter and commercial artist who also contributed to the *Strand*. Employing the 'heightened immediacy' of the modern magazine illustration, the image further draws the reader into the poacher's world through use of the personal pro noun. 'I keep at a proper distance' explains the expert craftsman as he patiently waits on his snare [Fig. 3.7].⁷⁹ With the poacher again extolling the virtues of his 'jolly life' where the 'bit of risk' makes the fun, Bensusan concluded his article on a wholly affirming note:

He was the type of man entirely free from the taint of loafer, a shrewd, cunning sportsman, one who has made poaching a high art instead of a common breach of the law. I was with him for several hours, and learnt more in the time than could be acquired by a year's casual study in the great book of Nature.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Beegan, *Mass Image*, 22.

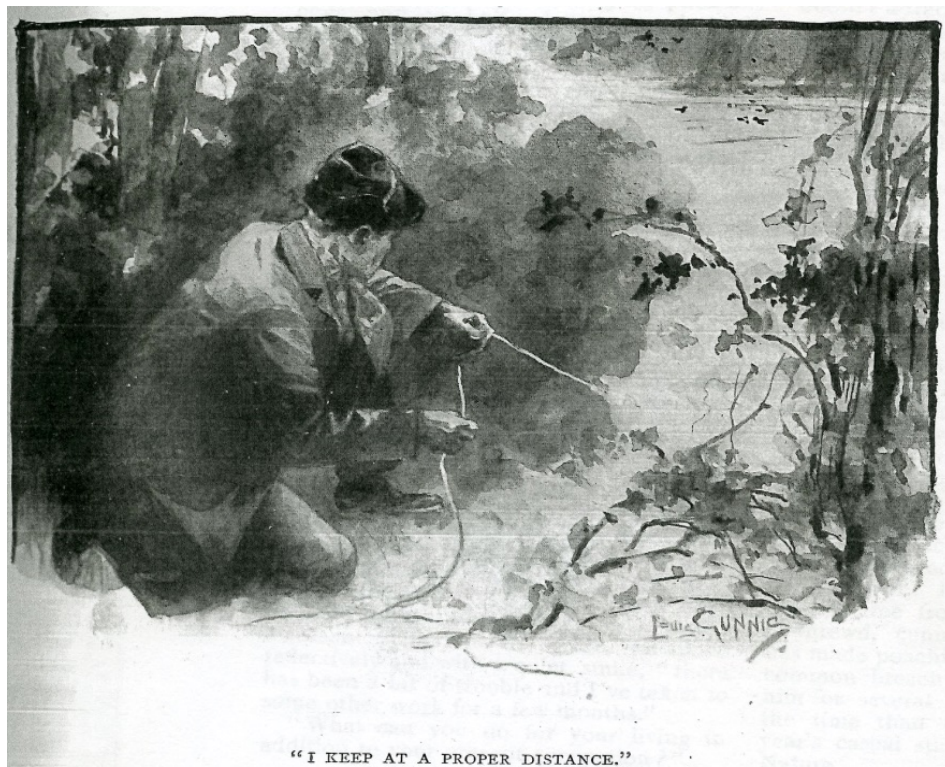
⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, 22-23.

⁷⁸ Robert L. Patten, 'The New Cultural Market Place' in John (ed), *Victorian Literary Culture*, 504.

⁷⁹ S.L. Bensusan, 'The Poacher', *English Illustrated Magazine*, April 1897, 76-79.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 80. In August 1893 the magazine had carried an article on 'Poachers and Poaching' by the popular nature writer, A Son of the Marshes [Denham Jordan]. This was drawn from the same author's book, also 1893, *With the Woodlanders and by the Tide*.

Bensusan's use of the word 'type' notwithstanding, what we have here is the poacher as a conscious individual.



3.7 Louis Gunnis, *English Illustrated Magazine*, April 1897.

Closely linked to the growth of the illustrated magazine was the widening use of photography. As can be seen from Figure 3.8, as early as the 1850s the subject of poaching was being addressed by the new technology. Emphasising the likelihood of the poacher being caught, rather than documenting his actions, the principal subject is actually the Bedfordshire gamekeeper. Indeed, the photograph can be seen as a new addition to the traditional 'gamekeeper's museum' whereby trapped vermin and other pests were put on public display. The image also dates from around the time that police forces began to keep rudimentary visual records of prisoners as part of what John Tagg regards as a developing surveillance society.⁸¹ However, photography's role was always ambiguous, and if the photograph was to be used as tool against poachers, and numerous other criminal types, it would also be a means of more positive representation

⁸¹ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke, 1988), 74.

with its offering of ‘new and sometimes emancipatory images both of society and of the individual within it.’⁸²



3.8 The gamekeeper, Norman Snoxell, with an unknown figure as a poacher, c.1854. Note the size differential between the two men. The law is literally bearing down on the poacher. Image courtesy of Bedfordshire Archives Service.

By the 1880s the camera no longer had the status of a piece of scientific apparatus or a mechanical novelty and beyond its official uses was a well-established part of everyday life. Between 1880 and 1900 the number of professional, and more importantly amateur, photographers increased dramatically and camera clubs and dedicated publications proliferated. With marked improvements in camera speed and mobility, photography now offered the means of providing a wealth of visual information ‘about one’s own nation and culture, and, more particularly, about the unfamiliar.’⁸³ Such now was the pervasiveness and power of the photographic image - especially in its falsely, but

⁸² Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Aldershot, 2001), 114.

⁸³ Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge, 2000), 3.

widely assumed, capacity to provide an unmediated recording of reality - that in 1897 the National Photographic Record Association was launched with the aim of directing local volunteers to capture for posterity the ancient buildings and folk-customs they saw around them.⁸⁴ The year that brought the establishment of the NPRA also saw the first appearance of *Country Life*, a publication that in part defined itself through its extensive use of photographic illustration. As well as documenting a day's shooting on a well-known sporting estate or grouse moor, another of the magazine's specialisms was the reproduction of pleasingly rustic scenes to create a vision of a settled and harmonious countryside for its largely middle-class readership.⁸⁵

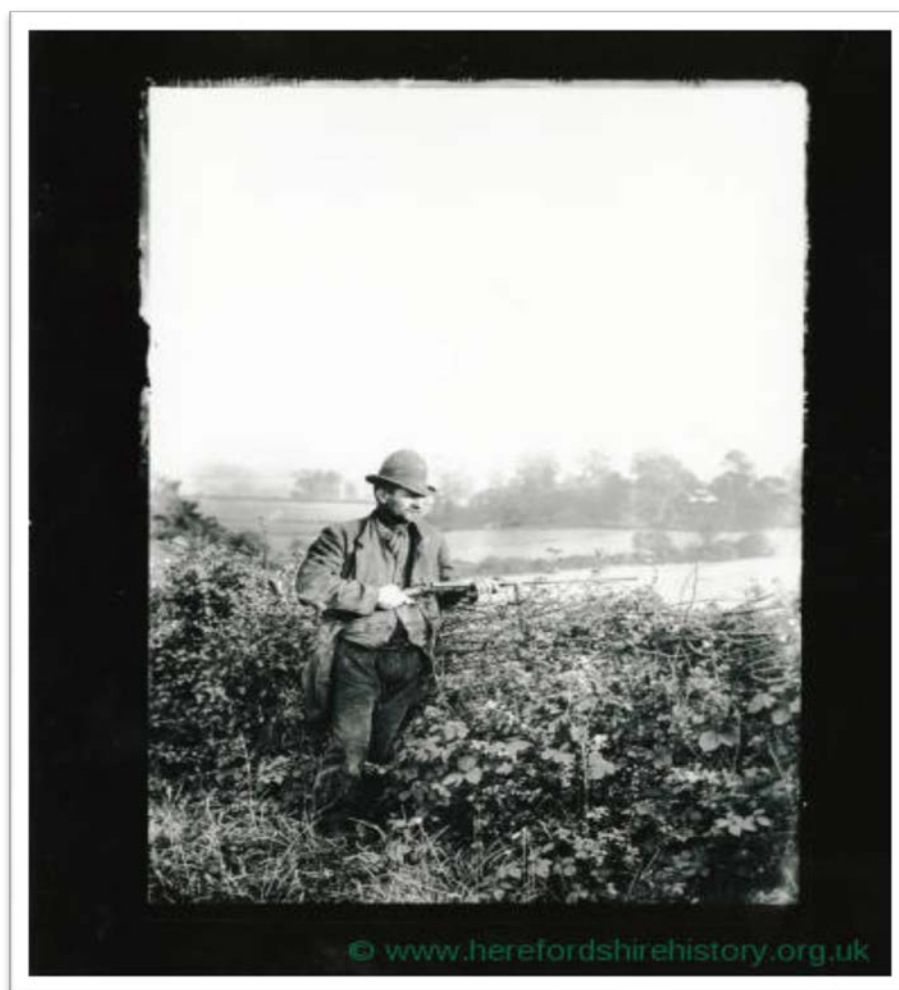
In other words, a great deal of the photographic output of the period was centred on the landscape and villages of rural England – a world to be celebrated and enjoyed for its manifold charms, but also to be documented and logged before it was irretrievably lost. At a time of rapid social change, the appeal of this kind of photography is not hard to discern. In a paradoxically self-denying way, the latest technology would be employed to create permanent images of an older, pre-industrial, England that was 'wooded, magical and deeply rural'.⁸⁶ It is no coincidence that we now find the expert photographer and originator of the theory and study of ley lines, Alfred Watkins, busy documenting the ancient buildings and folkways of his native Herefordshire. Intended to be used as an illustration for a later work (not completed) on John Masefield, the earthily rugged figure captured by Watkins' camera forms an integral part of the ancient landscape that surrounds him [Fig. 3.9].⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Beegan, *Mass Image*, 187; Elizabeth Edwards, Peter James, Martin Barnes, *A Record of England: Sir Benjamin Stone and the National Photographic Record Association, 1897-1910* (London, 2006).

⁸⁵ Roy Strong, *Country Life, 1897-1997. The English Arcadia* (London, 1996), 16-83.

⁸⁶ John Taylor, *A Dream of England: Landscape, photography and the tourist's imagination* (Manchester, 1994), 5-6.

⁸⁷ Ron and Jennifer Shoesmith, *Alfred Watkins' Herefordshire in his own words and photographs* (Little Logaston, 2012), 123-24.



3.9 ‘The Poacher’, Alfred Watkins, c.1890. Image courtesy of Herefordshire Libraries Collection. Though not as far as I know published in his lifetime, Watkins’ photograph has been included in a number of later publications including the volumes edited by G.E. Mingay on *The Victorian Countryside*. It also forms the front cover for the collection edited by John Humphreys, *Tales of the Old Poachers*.

Moving from west to east and into the open, but equally magical (and deeply rural) spaces of Suffolk and Norfolk, we have the work of Peter Henry Emerson. Coming from a family of sugar plantation owners, the independently wealthy Emerson held wide-ranging interests in history, anthropology and folk-lore. On coming to photography while studying medicine at Cambridge, he sought to combine the science of process and reproduction with the sensibilities of a painter. In his advocacy of ‘scientific naturalism’ and ‘pure photography’ (an image made from a single shot composed in the camera) he is now widely regarded as a key modernising influence on the medium.⁸⁸ However, as the foreword to a major 2006 survey of his work put it, ‘He

⁸⁸ Ibid., 91-92.

is best remembered ... as one of the great photographers of a landscape in transition as rural life became subject to a new order of things'.⁸⁹

It was against this new order that the artistically radical but socially conservative Emerson chose to set himself. Over a number of publications the Cuban-born Emerson conjured up a distinctive East Anglian landscape and populated it with a range of beautifully rendered 'working' figures – from furze cutters, to ploughmen, to eel pickers to poachers. Employing his revolutionary technique of differential focus, Emerson attempted to break away from what he saw as the overly theatrical pictorialism in the work of his despised rival and critic, Henry Peach Robinson, to arrive at a representation much truer to nature. Immersing himself in his chosen environment, and adopting an ostensibly ethnographic approach, Emerson's methods and descriptive language closely mirrored that of the socially privileged Victorian explorer and collector who went in pursuit of interesting 'specimens'.⁹⁰ Yet if openly shunning the costumed models and studio work of Peach Robinson, the latter's depiction of a picturesque and fundamentally unchanging rural way of life was to all intents and purposes what Emerson was seeking to create himself.

Like many intellectuals of his day, Emerson was simultaneously contemptuous and fearful of modern mass society and convinced that the 'natural order' should prevail. The kind of hierarchical and pre-industrial society that Emerson thought essential was still to be found, for the moment at least, in the remoter parts of the countryside. Given his views on the 'stern laws of heredity', it is not surprising that Emerson embarked on his project when theories of urban degeneration were starting to gain much wider currency.⁹¹ Dovetailing neatly with mounting concerns over rural depopulation, such theories, argues Gareth Stedman Jones, provided a 'mental landscape within which the middle class could recognise and articulate their own anxieties about urban existence.'⁹² In marked contrast to what Walkowitz discerns as the 'privileged gaze' of the late-

⁸⁹ Russell Roberts, foreword to John Taylor, *The Old Order and the New, P.H. Emerson and Photography, 1885-1895* (Munich, 2006), 6.

⁹⁰ Taylor, *Dream of England*, 93.

⁹¹ Quoted in Sarah Knights, 'Change and Decay: Emerson's Social Order' in Neil McWilliam and Veronica Sekules (eds), *Life and Landscape: P.H. Emerson Art and Photography in East Anglia, 1885-1900* (Norwich, 1986), 13.

⁹² Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), 151.

Victorian urban ‘explorer’, which sought to constitute the poor as ‘a race apart, outside the national community’, Emerson made his East Anglian ‘peasants’ an integral part of it.⁹³

Corresponding to what Nina Lübbren has identified as the late-Victorian trend for artists to record the marginal, but quietly heroic, lives of ‘fisherfolk’ and their coastal communities, Emerson’s efforts in East Anglia were primarily aimed at the picturing of its working life.⁹⁴ In part this was driven by his chosen methodology, but also by his disdain for the growing encroachments of tourism which he saw as undermining the more traditional way of life. This, and the steady replacement of established landowners with ‘upstart’ landlords, was highly corrosive to the society he wished to see maintained. From Emerson’s point of view, the shooting estates that were boosting a depressed local economy created more problems than they solved. The only photographs of shooting that Emerson took are not of pheasants and partridges but of snipe and wildfowl – birds of the marginal spaces of marshland and coastline, not of the artificially created covert. By creating ‘idealised types representing a traditional rural order of specialist skills’, Emerson was not so much recording a fragile reality as constructing an alternative vision of what the English countryside should be like.⁹⁵ For all their ostensibly unmediated naturalism, Emerson’s photographs were carefully composed and designed to achieve a very definite purpose.

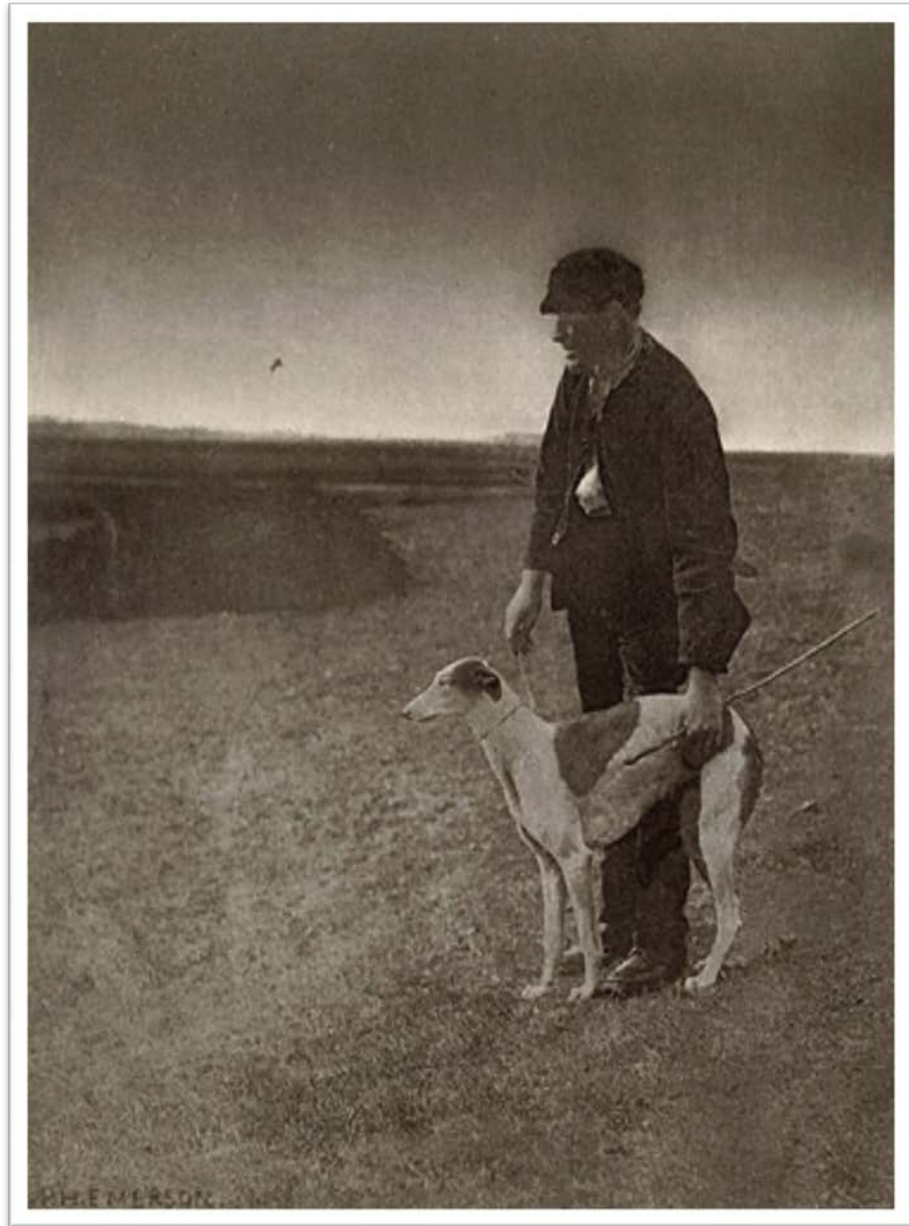
It is within this apparently timeless and naturally ordered world that Emerson located his poacher. Submitted for copyright in January 1886, all the poaching photographs known to have been taken by him would subsequently appear in his published work. The best known of these, ‘The Poacher, A Hare in View’ [Fig. 3.10] was also a medal winning entry at the Royal Photographic Society exhibition for 1887, and in 1890 it was widely circulated as an accompanying image to *Naturalistic Photography* where it was used to exemplify Emerson’s ideas on technique. This photograph, with descriptive text, was also included in his major 1888 work, *Pictures of East Anglian Life* – a book which also contained a half-tone reproduction of the same poacher crouching for cover behind

⁹³ Walkowitz, *City*, 19.

⁹⁴ Nina Lübbren, “‘Toilers of the Sea’: Fisherfolk and the Geographies of Tourism in England, 1880-1900” in Peters Corbett et al (eds), *Geographies of Englishness*, 29-63.

⁹⁵ Knights, ‘Change and Decay’ in McWilliam and Sekules (eds), *Life and Landscape*, 14.

some gorse.⁹⁶ The same poacher had also appeared in Emerson's previous collection, *Pictures From Life in Field and Fen* [Fig. 3.11].



3.10 ‘The Poacher, Hare in View’, from Peter Henry Emerson, *Pictures of East Anglian Life*, London, 1888. The copy shown here is from the 1889 supplement to *Naturalistic Photography*. In this form the photograph was widely circulated. Rather against his own strictures, the dog’s tail has now been cropped. Image courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

⁹⁶ P.H. Emerson, *Pictures of East Anglian Life* (London, 1888).



3.11 'The Poacher', from Peter Henry Emerson, *Pictures of Life in Field and Fen*, London, 1887. Image courtesy of the National Media Museum, Bradford.

Although remaining nameless and unknown, from Emerson's written testimony we are meant to assume that his poacher was the genuine article and that the photographer had spent time in his company. Warmly reviewing the book for the *Academy*, Henry Stuart Fagan suggested that 'he has not only lived among the people whom he describes, but that he is quite in touch with them.' Comparing Emerson's work to that of Augustus Jessop, a Norfolk clergyman and well-known writer on rural affairs, Fagan continued:

Herein lies one difference between him and Dr. Jessopp. The peasant never really opens out even to the most sympathetic of parsons. Dr. Emerson's most important chapter, for instance, is on poaching, and about poaching no peasant will talk freely with a parson. But Dr. Emerson has not only discussed as none but a layman wholly unconnected with squires and officials could do, he has himself been out o' nights.⁹⁷

As an apparently sympathetic participant observer, with little time for the new breed of landowners who were 'greedy to claim every foot', Emerson was prepared to defend poaching on the usual moral and economic terms (his chapter on poachers made reference both to John Bright's earlier criticisms of the Game Laws and to the activities

⁹⁷ *Academy*, 11th August 1888, 79.

of Frederick Gowing).⁹⁸ For the aristocratically inclined Emerson, however, financial imperatives and Game Law politics were far from being the most important justification for poaching. The reason that the poacher appealed so strongly to Emerson, was increasingly how a predominantly urban culture was coming to frame him. In showing the poacher as a man of quiet patience and skill, fully attuned to the landscape and to nature, Emerson was both reflecting and shaping this growingly pervasive representation. With his neat appearance and clean lined physicality, there is nothing here of the 'hollow eyed' or 'slinking' poacher or of the town-based poaching 'scum'. Set against the open spaces and big skies of East Anglia, the sparseness of the landscape forces our gaze to linger upon Emerson's chosen subject. The poacher is not just a man of the woods and the hedgerows, he is also a man of fen and field.

Working with nets and snares and in harmony with his carefully trained dog, this is the poacher as rugged individual and craftsmen. 'Let us now study the poacher at work', begins a typical passage from Emerson's writing on the subject.⁹⁹ With a number of expert commentators now expressing concern at the future survival of traditional country 'lore', the poacher of Emerson's construction was a living embodiment of what was taken to be the authentic culture of 'the folk'.¹⁰⁰ Outside of the law but integral to the life of an English rural community, Emerson's photographs are not simply representations of what remained a criminal activity, they are an open celebration and aestheticisation of it. And because of his unique skills with the camera, and the quality of the materials he used, 'Looking at Emerson's photographs was almost as good as being there.'¹⁰¹ Expensive to buy and restricted to limited runs, Emerson's photographic albums were a conscious denial of the mass market. Yet this is not to say that his work was not widely seen. Prone to making gifts of his pictures to museums and libraries, Emerson's beguiling images of life in a remote corner of England readily found, and maintained, an appreciative public.

Clearly fascinated by the subject, Emerson followed up his pictorial accounts of poaching with a number of tales and stories in several of his prose collections and

⁹⁸ Quoted in Clive Wilkins Jones, 'One of the Hard Old Breed: A Life of Peter Henry Emerson' in McWilliam and Sekules (eds), *Life and Landscape*, 3.

⁹⁹ Emerson, *Pictures*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Freeman, *Social Investigation and Rural England, 1870-1914* (Woodbridge, 2003), 67.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, *Old Order*, 39.

novels. In *English Idyls* (1889) and *East Coast Yarns* (1891) Emerson blended what he claimed as ‘scientific accuracy’ with a fabulist twist to create poaching characters of a mystical nature such as Darkel, whose ‘glittering blue eyes’ shine out against a ‘swarthy fringe of hair’, and Jim Jacques who sports a ‘black fur cap’ and ‘earth coloured clothes’.¹⁰² With his strong interest in local superstitions and folk-lore, ‘Emerson’s heroes’, notes Ian Jeffrey, are ‘masters of false impressions and subterfuges ... Darkel and the others have foreknowledge and uncanny abilities which make them into folk wizards.’¹⁰³ Constantly outwitting the authorities, and doing so with laconic ease and dry wit, the poachers of these tales seem to anticipate W.W. Jacob’s stories of the Claybury poacher, Bob Pretty, as well as presenting the poacher as a ready source of re-enchantment (see Chapter Four). By according the poacher and his mysterious ways such an important place in the community of picturesque labourers and peasants that Emerson was so keen to preserve, he shaped significantly the poacher of the imagined community too. Reproduced in numerous publications in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and readily viewable in various online archives, Emerson’s poacher is still very much in view.¹⁰⁴

Country Life: Ruralism and the Poacher

By the time that Emerson was at work in East Anglia, there was a growing sense that the life of the English countryside was being dangerously threatened by the forces of modernisation. Once the unfortunate run of persistently bad weather had been used up as an explanation for the problems within the rural economy, the most pressing cause for this agrarian crisis became the dramatically increased foreign competition and the cheaply imported food associated with it. As mechanisation added further to the decline of land-based work, so the existing pressures to abandon it further increased. Between 1851 and 1901 the agricultural workforce declined from around 2 million to 1.5 million, while in overall terms the rural population shrank to twenty-three per cent of a still

¹⁰² P.H. Emerson, *English Idyls* (London, 1889), 125-6; *East Coast Yarns* (London, 1891), 79. Poaching also featured prominently in Emerson’s 1892 novel, *A Son of the Fens*.

¹⁰³ Ian Jeffrey, ‘Fabulous Domains: Emerson as a Writer’ in McWilliam and Sekules (eds), *Life and Landscape*, 41-42.

¹⁰⁴ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 342, 361.

growing total. Over the same period, agriculture's contribution to gross national income declined from twenty per cent to six per cent.¹⁰⁵

However, this so-called 'rural exodus' was based on 'pull' factors as well as 'push'. The peak decade for rural population loss, 1871-81, actually predated the worst years of the depression.¹⁰⁶ If the flight from an increasingly unproductive land fed urbanisation, so urbanisation (or the prospect of emigration) encouraged flight. Alongside the better wages to be had elsewhere, other 'pull' factors identified at the time were poor housing, the apparent dullness of rural life compared to town life (especially for the young and more active), and a general lack of independence in a countryside still dominated by its traditional elites. In terms of the latter point, a key claim made by reformers was that by ending the landlord monopoly, and associated laws like those attaching to game, the countryside could be 're-colonised' by the many who still desired to work it.

But it was not just groups like the LNS and the ELRL who centred their attention on the land. In a paradox famously identified by Raymond Williams, by the start of the twentieth century an inverse relationship existed 'between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas.'¹⁰⁷ The more economically and politically marginal the English countryside became, the greater its symbolic attraction and weight. In a further paradox, the more vulnerable the countryside appeared to the forces of change, the more permanent and culturally vital it was portrayed as being. In the wake of Martin Wiener's influential study on the longer-term economic effects of this process, a considerable body of work has traced both the development of English ruralist culture and the various forms that it took.¹⁰⁸

Out of this work, a number of interlocking points have emerged. First was the identification made between notions of an ancient and unchanging countryside with a

¹⁰⁵ Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation*, (London, 1983), 223-24, 308.

¹⁰⁶ W.A. Armstrong, 'The Flight from the Land' in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside*, vol. i (London, 1981), 129.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Country and City*, 297.

¹⁰⁸ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Harmondsworth, 1985, first publ. 1981). And see Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914* (London, 1982); Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England' in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (London, 1986), 62-88; Rebecca Scutt and Alistair Bonnett, *In Search of England: Popular Representations of Englishness and the English Countryside* (Newcastle, 1996).

prevailing sense of a ‘timeless’ English past. While not denying the forces of change, ruralism offered a useful anchor to the present. Second was the connection made between the countryside and national identity, which in time produced an ‘ideology of England and Englishness’ that was (is) ‘to a remarkable degree rural.’¹⁰⁹ This in turn was linked to a still expanding empire and the need to establish an attractive Anglo-centric representation of what the ‘home land’ looked like.¹¹⁰ Tracing the growing impulse towards the ‘reconstruction of rural space’ for non-productivist purposes, Jeremy Burchardt notes how ‘the “rural” increasingly becomes defined by landscape and identity’.¹¹¹ And third, there was the widespread valorisation of what were taken to be traditional country practices and folkways. Mrs Humphry Ward’s ‘counter-urban’ decision to settle at Stocks in 1894 was driven largely by her desire to escape the ‘villadom’ of Surrey into ‘the heart of a district as rural and unspoilt as any that could be found in England.’¹¹² Ruralism, in other words, fed itself.

If partly a form of existential compensation, or ‘physic balance wheel’, the ruralist impulse was not necessarily regressive or anti-modern.¹¹³ Rather, this was a flexible cultural construction that ‘could be inflected in multiple directions and could articulate quite different senses both of the past and of the future.’¹¹⁴ Although compositionally very different, groups like the CPS and the Clarion movement both saw the countryside as an important resource that could cater for a broad range of cultural interests and pursuits. ‘The “rural” concerns of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods’, insists Paul Readman, ‘were fully assimilated into the cultural vernacular of the times.’¹¹⁵ As part of this ‘lay discourse’ of the rural, it was often the more humble inhabitants who were taken up and celebrated. An interesting feature of this process can be found in the recasting of the ‘Hodge’ stereotype whereby the perennially stolid rural labourer of popular parlance became invested with a range of more positive attributes.¹¹⁶ Within

¹⁰⁹ Howkins, ‘Discovery’, 62.

¹¹⁰ Lowe et al, ‘A Civilised Retreat?’, 65.

¹¹¹ Jeremy Burchardt, ‘Historicising counterurbanisation: In-migration and the reconstruction of rural space in Berkshire, 1901-51’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38 (2012), 155.

¹¹² Quoted in Janet Penrose Trevelyan, *Mrs Humphry Ward* (London, 1923), 102.

¹¹³ Wiener, *English Culture*, 49

¹¹⁴ Dentith, *Cultural Forms*, 101-02.

¹¹⁵ Paul Readman, ‘Landscape Preservation, “advertising disfigurement”, and English National Identity, c.1890-1914’, *Rural History*, 12 (2001), 64.

¹¹⁶ See Alun Howkins, ‘From Hodge to Lob: reconstructing the English farm labourer, 1870-1914’ in Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison*

this representational makeover, the local village poacher was readily included in a cast of typical country characters. Reviewing George Morley's account of life in the Warwickshire countryside, the *Daily Mail* observed how the

author's sketches of life around the Red House Farm, of birds and dogs and sheep, meadows, hedgerows and ditches are soothing to the city reader's jaded mind, while his records of rustic colloquialisms and descriptions of the life of the poacher and his faithful lurcher, of shepherding and of rural merry-making, are equally refreshing.¹¹⁷

Two notable manifestations of this developing ruralist culture, possessing strong links to 'popular' notions of the national past and incorporating various representations of poaching, were the growing focus on the life of Shakespeare, and the collection and publication of traditional country songs. Bringing these strands together we have Cecil Sharp. Writing in the Shakespeare Festival handbook for 1913, the leading figure in the English folk-song and dance movement claimed that in the work of the Bard 'the English people found ... their most complete expression ... he was the spokesman of our race'.¹¹⁸ Instituted in Stratford in 1879, the annual spring festival was part of a rapidly expanding Shakespeare industry.¹¹⁹ Above all, it centred on the playwright's early life in a (still) picturesque Warwickshire town surrounded by 'hedges, fields, and glorious woods'.¹²⁰ If, as Jonathan Bate contends, through much-loved characters like Sir John Falstaff (a poacher himself in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) Shakespeare originated the idea of 'Deep England', he also became a powerful and widely understood signifier of it.¹²¹

Within this context of seeing Shakespeare as a typical, if simultaneously extraordinary, Englishman, the possibility of him once being a poacher undoubtedly loomed large. From *Country Life* to *Reynolds' Newspaper*, this 'lively incident in the life of one who

(Aldershot, 1996) 218-235. For the idea of the 'rural' as lay discourse see Burchardt, 'Historising counterurbanisation', 156.

¹¹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 13th July 1897. The work under review was George Morley, *In Russet Mantle Clad: Scenes of Rural Life* (London, 1897).

¹¹⁸ Cecil Sharp, 'The Stratford-upon-Avon Vacation School of Folk Song and Dance', in *A Handbook to the Stratford Festival* (London, 1913), 110.

¹¹⁹ See Nicola J. Watson, 'Shakespeare on the Tourist Trail' in Robert Shaughnessy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 2007), 199-226; Julia Thomas, *Shakespeare's Shrine: The Bard's Birthplace and the Invention of Stratford-upon-Avon* (Philadelphia, 2012).

¹²⁰ John Leyland, *The Shakespeare Country* (London, 1900), 2.

¹²¹ Johnathan Bate, *The Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London, 2009), 35.

has helped to make England great' was widely accepted and enjoyed.¹²² Within this pleasingly double-sided narrative, Shakespeare was undoubtedly a genius, but he was also a typical Englishman out for a bit of poached game. The implications of Shakespeare's representational life as a poacher will be explored more fully in the next chapter, but for now we might note a striking illustrative photograph from a typical publication of the period, James Leon Williams' *The Home and Haunts of Shakespeare* (1892). At a time of growing popular interest in the national past, and working on the idea of England as a 'palimpsest', Williams collapsed the sixteenth century into the late nineteenth as part of a conscious attempt to 'reproduce, and in imagination, re-enact ... scenes pictured in the records of a by-gone time' [Fig. 3.12].¹²³



3.12 'The Poacher', from James Leon Williams, *The Home and Haunts of Shakespeare*, London, 1892. Like Emerson, Williams favoured photogravure as a high quality reproduction technique.

¹²² T.H.G., 'Shakespeare as a Sportsman', *Baily's Magazine*, August 1872, 146.

¹²³ James Leon Williams, *The Home and Haunts of Shakespeare* (London, 1892), Section Two; Taylor, *Dream of England*, 81. On the developing Victorian interest in the national past see Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (London, 2002), ch. 2.

Though arguably lacking the attractiveness of Emerson's poacher, or the rugged earthiness of the man captured by Watkins, this crudely posed image is far less notable for its formal qualities than for its conception. Part of the life of Shakespeare's England, suggests Williams, the poacher was a satisfyingly authentic figure from the past, but he was equally, and necessarily, of the present too.

In February 1899 the first annual general meeting of the Folk Song Society was held in Mayfair under the chairmanship of the composer and conductor, Sir Alexander Mackenzie. As stated in its rulebook, the primary function of the new organisation was the 'collection and preservation of Folk Songs, Ballads and Tunes, and the publication of such as these as may be advisable.'¹²⁴ If in name not solely concerned with the collection of traditional English songs, in practice this was largely the case. In the words of Sir Hubert Parry's inaugural address to the Society, 'I take it that we are engaged chiefly with the folk-songs of England'.¹²⁵ Though comprising a mixed bag of self-defined 'amateurs', the society was not lacking for seriousness of purpose or ambition. As with groups like the NPRA and the Folk-Lore Society, the FSS was representative of a 'complex cultural matrix' in which material expressions of 'the past' were to be collected and saved for the enjoyment and instruction of present, and indeed future, generations.¹²⁶ Above all, the culture and customs of the past thought most worthy of this 'salvage ethnography' were to be discovered in 'the rural areas' where they lay 'beneath the thin surface of modernity'.¹²⁷

The speech given by Parry, the future composer of 'Jerusalem' and one of the Society's vice-presidents, was full of the kind of anti-commercial and anti-urban sentiment to be found in Emerson's work on East Anglia. In terms that would later be echoed by Cecil Sharp, Parry set the 'sordid vulgarity of our great city-populations' with all their 'false ideals' against the 'courage' and 'quiet reticence of our country folk'.¹²⁸ Continuing his

¹²⁴ Frederick Keel, 'The Folk Song Society, 1898-1948', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 5, 1948, 111.

¹²⁵ Sir Hubert Parry, 'Inaugural Address', *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, 1 (1899), 2.

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photography, "Englishness" and Collective Memory: The National Photographic Record Association, 1897-1910' in Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister (eds), *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts* (NY, 2006), 55.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* Through figures like the folklorist and song collector, Charlotte Burne, the FSS had close links with the Folklore Society, established in 1878. The term 'folk song' was itself of recent creation and did not come into general use until the 1880s.

¹²⁸ Parry, 'Address', 2-3.

theme, Parry claimed that a profound, but now endangered, expression of the ‘simple beauty of primitive thought’ was to be found in the nation’s (by which Parry meant the countryside’s) folk-music; here, he concluded, ‘might lie the ultimate solution of the problem of characteristic national art.’¹²⁹ Rooted in fin de siècle concerns about the nature and development of English culture and society, and predicated on a powerful missionary zeal, the establishment of the FSS 1898 is traceable to an already growing practice of ballad and folk-song collection. In this case, both from printed sources and, as the new organisation would come to insist, from the ‘mouths of the people’ themselves. Inspired by a general sense of ‘romantic nationalism’ in which ‘essentially English’ cultural artefacts were energetically looked for, various ballads about poachers and poaching were gathered, annotated, and made available to a body of people unlikely to have knowledge or experience of the act themselves.¹³⁰ In a context of rediscovering the spirit of the English people, the poacher of the roughly produced broadside was increasingly the poacher of the neatly bound anthology.

We have already seen how in the mid-nineteenth century a number of ballad and song collections, designed and priced for a range of audiences, had come on to the market. However, by the time that the most famous of these, William Chappell’s *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, was part reissued in 1894, a new generation of published works had largely superseded them. Taking the period from 1888 to the establishment of the FSS a decade later, we find that many of these included poaching-themed songs – either as stand-alone text or with accompanying tunes. As the best known of these, ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’ was also included in a range of school-song anthologies or separately issued sheets offered by leading musical publishers like Novello.¹³¹ Focusing on text only, John Ashton’s important collection of ‘modern’ street ballads, by which he meant the years 1800 to 1850, not only included the inevitable ‘Lincolnshire Poacher’ (given here as ‘The Bold Poacher’) but also ‘The Death of Poor Bill Brown’, ‘Botany

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Vic Gammon, ‘Folk Song Collecting in Sussex and Surrey, 1843-1914’, *History Workshop*, 10 (1980), 78.

¹³¹ W.G. McNaught (ed.), *Novello’s School Songs* (London, 1895), ‘The Poacher’, arranged by Percy Godfrey, no.352; John Farmer (ed.), *Gaudeamus: A Selection of Songs for Colleges and Schools* (London, 1891); *Mathias and Stricklands School Songs* (London, 1893); W.F. Trimmell (ed.), *Songs for Public Schools* (London, 1900).

Bay' and 'Van Dieman's Land'.¹³² Along with its breadth of material, and popularising intent, Ashton's gathering of some of the most popular ballads was a useful reminder of the former extent of the broadside trade, both in London and in regional centres, and of the links this maintained between town and countryside. Although in their determined pursuit of the uncorrupted 'folk' tradition, many of the FSS's most prominent members would choose to overlook the fact, a great deal of the material they gathered was in fact the result of complex transmission loops in which literate and oral culture intermingled and cross fertilised.¹³³

Two of the period's most important song collectors who were prepared to concede this point were Lucy Broadwood and Frank Kidson. Niece of the fabled Rev. John Broadwood, whose 1843 collection of *Old English Songs* was taken by the FSS as something of an ur-text, Lucy Broadwood's 1893 collaboration with the scholar and critic, J.A. Fuller-Maitland, was an ambitious attempt to record at least one traditional song from every county of England and Wales. If falling short of its goal, and employing some questionable methodology, there is no doubting the influence the project had on the developing interest in folksong – a term itself that had only just come into use.¹³⁴ Equally significant was that the collection reached beyond the compiler's own circle of cultivated enthusiasts and found a wide and appreciative audience.¹³⁵ For us, the importance of *English County Songs* is that like Frank Kidson's *Traditional Tunes* (1891), the poaching songs they contained were given a firm regional basis. In the case of the former, Nottinghamshire, through a version of 'Thorney Moor Woods', and for the latter we have Yorkshire. Of the four poaching songs that Kidson chose to include in *Traditional Tunes*, three of them are firmly located in his home county: 'The Death of Bill Brown'; 'The Sledmere Poachers' and 'Hares in the Old Plantation.'¹³⁶ Along with the tireless efforts of Sabine Baring Gould in the West Country, the work of these collectors not only kept the poacher of the broadsides alive in the mind of the non-specialist reader (in 1895 Baring Gould contributed a long article on poaching ballads to

¹³² John Ashton, *Modern Street Ballads* (London, 1888), 202-5, 359-63. On Ashton's approach see E. David Gregory, *The Late Victorian Song Revival: The Persistence of English Melody, 1878-1903* (Lanham, 2010), 51-53.

¹³³ Robert S. Thomson, 'The Development of the Broadside Ballad Trade and its Influence Upon the Transmission of English Folksongs' (PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1974), 215-17.

¹³⁴ Lucy Broadwood and J.A. Fuller-Maitland, *English County Songs* (London, 1893); Gregory, *Song Revival*, 307-10.

¹³⁵ Margaret Dean Smith, *A Guide to English Folk Song Collections, 1822-1952* (Liverpool, 1954), 18.

¹³⁶ Frank Kidson, *Traditional Tunes: A Collection of Ballad Airs* (Oxford, 1891).

Lloyds' Weekly Newspaper), they re-emphasised the fact of the poacher's wide cultural diffusion.¹³⁷ In doing this, they simultaneously added to it. If remaining his representational heartland, the late Victorian poacher did not just come from Lincolnshire.

That the poacher was not just a phenomenon of the southern and eastern counties was further emphasised in published collections like *Sporting Anecdotes* (1889), in which the skills of the northern poacher were set above those working the 'southern woods and coverts', and in the various popular works of the Cumbrian-based newspaper publisher and naturalist, John Watson.¹³⁸ A magistrate and alderman, the eminently respectable Watson wrote a number of articles and books on the subject of poaching.¹³⁹ His best-known effort was *The Confessions of a Poacher* (1890), which purported to be the recollections of a local man now in his eighties. Serialised in the *Sunday Times* the previous year, the book was also issued in a cheap edition in 1893. In line with Jefferies' earlier work, the poaching here was of the kind most likely to find a wide audience: locally based, centred on colourful individuals, and rooted in the natural world. Above all, it was poaching as an ancient art and craft, where the poacher and his canine partner were a village institution.

In Watson's world, 'Our Bohemian has poached time out of mind. His family have been poachers for generations. The county justices, the magistrates' clerk, the county constable, and the gaol books all testify to the same fact.'¹⁴⁰ Here the inveterate poacher is not above apprehension and punishment, but his strong sporting instincts and love of the open air will always drive him back to the fields and coverts. He also 'poaches square', and though 'his life is one long protest against the game laws, he is not without a rude code of morality' – within limits 'old Phil' also observes the close seasons.¹⁴¹ Noting the reissued *Confessions* in March 1893, *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper* was impressed by the poacher's 'lawless adventures in pursuit of game during a long life',

¹³⁷ *Lloyds' Weekly Newspaper*, 22nd December 1895.

¹³⁸ Ellangowan [James G. Bertram], *Sporting Anecdotes* (London, 1889), 84.

¹³⁹ See for example, 'Poachers and Poaching', *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1888, 178-195; 'Poaching as a Fine Art', *Spectator*, 12th October 1889, 17-19.

¹⁴⁰ John Watson, *The Confessions of a Poacher* (Rhyl, 1973, first publ. 1890), 126; Idem, *Poachers and Poaching*, 1-2.

¹⁴¹ Watson, *Poachers*, 24, 29.

while at the other end of the spectrum a leading writer on field sports could recommend Watson's 'capital' books as a suitable addition to the gun room library.¹⁴²

Noting the obvious debts to Jefferies, reviewers focused heavily on the degree of practical information that Watson provided. In its own review of the book - which coincided with the start of the pheasant-shooting season - *Reynolds' Newspaper* mischievously included some extracts on how to poach the bird.¹⁴³ Central to Watson's representation of poaching, therefore, were the well-practised skills in woodcraft that his subjects displayed, along with their natural intelligence and audacity. The poacher was also privileged, as the town dweller was not, to know the 'night side of nature', a phrase popularised by the success of Catherine Crowe's book on the uncanny and the supernatural.¹⁴⁴ If not quite the semi-mystical figure of Emerson's Darkel, Watson's 'old Phil' was not far off:

The man who excels in poaching must be country bred. He must not only know the land, but the ways of the game by heart. Every sign of wind and weather must be observed, as all help in the silent trade. Then there is the rise and wane of the moon ... and the shifting of the birds with the seasons. These and a hundred other things must be kept in an unwritten calendar, and only the poacher can keep it.¹⁴⁵

Watson's other major theme was that the true poacher is a sportsman with essentially the same rights to hunt game as those who are formally qualified. One of 'old Phil's' associates goes so far as to tell a magistrate that 'because blue blood doesn't run in my veins that's no reason why I shouldn't have my share.'¹⁴⁶ And in what reads like a plot from an Ealing comedy, even the parish clerk and the postman are given to some recreational poaching. We are also told the story of how the poacher exploited his own 'gentlemanly appearance' (his ancestors had been 'small estatesmen') to pass himself off as a 'squire' and have a day's unlawful shooting at a keeper's expense. However, Watson's writing was not intended to serve any obvious political purpose and the poacher accepts that the laws he is breaking provide him with his *raison d'être*. Ultimately the poacher needs the Game Laws as much as he needs the wealthy to preserve the game.

¹⁴² *Lloyds' Weekly Newspaper*, 22nd March 1893; *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 8th October 1893; Alex Innes Shand, *The Gun Room* (London, 1905), 88.

¹⁴³ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 8th October 1893.

¹⁴⁴ Watson, *Confessions*, 24; Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature: or, Ghosts and ghost seers* (London, 1892, first publ. 1848).

¹⁴⁵ Watson, *Confessions*, 53.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

As with Jefferies' and Emerson's poachers, Watson's northern variants are therefore part of the same natural order of things, an essential aspect of traditional life in the English countryside – or more properly the idea of what this should be. In a good example of this growingly common aspect of poacher representations, Oswald Crawford's *A Year of Sport and Natural History* (1895), recorded how 'Even the squire' (not, we might note, the wealthy renter of a shoot) has a soft place in his heart for the dexterous or bold Poacher.'¹⁴⁷ With concerns over the countryside now unleashing a 'passion for enquiry', one of the many articles of the period on the 'flight from the fields' singled out the poacher as a man who 'stands alone' and as 'perhaps the one person left in humble life who can appreciate the delights of the country'.¹⁴⁸ The humble countryman poacher, with his roots deep in antiquity and the land that he trod, was now more than just the bearer of poached game.

Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century there is little doubt that the poacher had developed a fully formed representational presence stretched across a range of nationally instituted media. If poaching was declining in practice, and becoming more localised, at the level of representation the reverse was true. Timing here was important. Within a wider perception of a more ordered and better policed society, in general the poacher represented a reduced level of threat. As with violent protest crimes like animal maiming and incendiarism - with which the poacher was often associated - the worst years for the poaching affray were now passed. All this occurred at precisely the moment when the English countryside, now less important in economic terms, was coming to be used as a growingly important cultural resource. As historians of ruralism have noted, 'Love of the countryside extended easily into love of country life and country people', and if distance inevitably existed between the subject of the representation and its consumer, 'that distance was hidden by a fantasy of little details'.¹⁴⁹ It was partly through the reported 'little details' of the 'poacher and his ways' that poaching was engaged with by a population whose daily life was ever more

¹⁴⁷ H.H.S. Pearse, 'The Tricks of Poachers', in Oswald Crawford (ed.), *A Year of Sport and Natural History* (London, 1895), 141.

¹⁴⁸ Freeman, *Social Investigation*, 74; Arthur Gaye, 'The Flight from the Fields', *Macmillan's Magazine*, February 1892, 301.

¹⁴⁹ Marsh, *Land*, 60; Sayer, *Women*, 156.

removed from the land. If the English countryside is taken as a form of ‘spatial practice’, both physically present, and inhabited, and ‘culturally produced’, and imagined, the idea of the poacher now formed a significant part of this complex landscape that was simultaneously ‘ontological’ and ‘ideological’.¹⁵⁰

But it wasn’t just the spread, and penetration, of the poacher’s representational presence that is notable, it was the multiplicity of forms that it took. Just as there were ‘variants of ruralism’ to suit a variety of cultural and ideological needs, there were a number of well-established poaching types available to serve a range of dispensations.¹⁵¹ With the cult of the countryside set to grow further, and with game preserving and the Land Question due to reach their own historic peaks in the opening two decades of the new century, the signifying potential of the poacher would continue to be made good use of. Less ‘Society’s martyr’ than in earlier times of Game Law conflict, but still commanding ‘half-ashamed sympathy’, the poacher would also become a source of more apparently straightforward amusement – part of the ‘humour and pathos’ of rural life as one collection of sketches from the time had it.¹⁵² Above all, if as some scholars contend ‘there was a strong sense in late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourse that English identity was located in the soil’, as writers of the importance of Kipling were prepared to suggest to their Edwardian readers, the ostensibly marginal figure of the poacher was also an exemplary one.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Robert Burden, ‘Englishness and Spatial Practices’ in Robert Burden and Stephan Kohl (eds), *Landscape and Englishness* (Amsterdam, 2006), 18. And see Matless, *Landscape*, 12-13.

¹⁵¹ Wiener, *English Culture*, 50.

¹⁵² *Country Life*, 16th October 1897, 397; Caroline Gearey, *Rural Life: Its Humour and Pathos* (London, 1899).

¹⁵³ Edwards et al, *Record*, 17.

Chapter Four

‘Nothing except all England’: Representations of the Poacher c.1900-1920

[I]t is not on its temptations to crime that the preservation of game is now denounced. It is now a political cry.¹

The poacher does not seek advertisement, neither has he attained any degree of public patronage, and yet he has many sympathisers who admire his mode if not his methods, and his courage and resource are qualities to be envied.²

If old Nick is ever outwitted the trick will be performed by a poacher.³

Between the turn of the century and the outbreak of war, both the preservation and shooting of game, and the various controversies attached to the Land Question, reached their historic peaks. To be sure, there was always an urban dimension to this question and ‘landlordism’ was to be found in town as well as village, but it was over the countryside that the question mattered most. Alongside a growingly heated discourse on the ownership and usage of the land, the prevailing culture of ruralism reflected a growing sense of the virtues of a life lived closer to it. Commenting on this ‘cult of the country’, the *Spectator* recorded in 1903 how ‘hundreds of books after hundreds ... have established a real hold upon the minds of readers’.⁴ From the readers of such books, to folk-song collectors, to the growing number of cyclists and ramblers, both imagined and actual journeys into the countryside had much to commend them. In a society that was now overwhelmingly, and uniquely, urban, the lives and landscapes of the rural world were central to Edwardian thought and feeling. ‘The soul of England must not be sought in the city but in the countryside’ was a declaration typical of the time.⁵

¹ T.E. Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Summary of His Position* (4th ed., London, 1907), 110. See for example the pamphlet produced in 1909 by the future Liberal MP, R.L. Outhwaite, *Peer or Peasant: The Ruin of England and the Remedy*.

² *Review of Reviews*, August 1915, 159.

³ *Daily Mail*, 5th November 1901.

⁴ *Spectator*, 25th April 1903, 25.

⁵ Ernest C. Pulbrook, *The English Countryside* (London, 1915), 2.

Located within the broader issue of ‘the land’ was its growing employment for recreational shooting. Although agriculture was recovering from its low point of the mid-1890s, and the rural population was stabilising, the humiliations of the war in South Africa had deepened concerns over national efficiency and the state of domestic food supply. With 50% of agricultural land subordinate to the needs of preservation, and with the number of game farms and gamekeepers still growing, the ‘elaborate futilities’ of the Edwardian shoot were subject to ever closer scrutiny.⁶ Moreover, this came not just from the usual ranks of radical reformers and humanitarians, but from across a broad section of society. The Conservative supporting landowner, Christopher Turnor, was not alone in worrying how under the influence of rich city men ‘more game is preserved than is compatible with the interests of agriculture’.⁷

In addition, whilst prosecutions for poaching continued to fall, resentment of the Game Laws remained strong. With landowner-dominated institutions like the magistracy coming under pressure to reform, this was important. Calling in 1902 for a tightening of the laws, the *Field* had to concede that ‘it was useless in this democratic century to ask for fresh powers to deal with the poaching fraternity’.⁸ The ongoing struggles of open-air recreationalists for greater access to the countryside also sustained the idea of a selfish elite taking their pleasure at the expense of the many. Instances like the loss of Charles Trevelyan’s 1908 Bill on extending rights of access to mountains and moorlands only added to this view.⁹ In the words of a 1912 memorandum drawn up at the request of the Liberal MP and newspaper publisher, Richard Winfrey,

The Game Laws retain their place on the Statute Book in spite of the protests of many men of all parties, of landowners of the better type, of farmers, of the rural population, of prison chaplains and governors, of humanitarians, of economists, of lovers of nature; in spite of the urgent recommendations of Parliamentary Committees appointed from time to time to examine into the question.¹⁰

It was against this backdrop of intensifying land and Game Law politics that representations of the poacher achieved new levels of reach and complexity. At the

⁶ Thorstein Veblen quoted in Eric Jones, ‘The Environmental Effects of Blood Sports in Lowland England since 1750’, *Rural History*, 20, 2009, 53.

⁷ Christopher Turnor, *Land Problems and National Welfare* (London, 1911), 17. Supporters of fox-hunting and advocates of more efficient economic use of woodland were also critical of game preservers.

⁸ *Field*, 4th January 1902.

⁹ On Trevelyan’s Bill see Harvey Taylor, *A Claim on the Countryside: A History of the British Outdoor Movement* (Edinburgh, 1997), 122-48.

¹⁰ NA ‘The Game Laws’, T 172/ 45 (1912), 3-4. This is the copy that was sent to Lloyd George.

point of what Krishan Kumar has identified as ‘the moment of Englishness’, influential writers as different as the Hammonds and Rudyard Kipling were able to invest the poacher with values and assumptions linked to their own particular visions.¹¹ In the former case the poacher was the classic social rebel and village Hampden, in the latter he was a true son-of-the-soil possessed of a range of enviable skills and qualities. At the same time the established rules held and the unappealing poachers of the town-based gang remained largely beyond the pale. If in some areas, however, poaching continued to be the principal source of rural crime, in overall terms the available figures show a continuation of the downward trend already evident.¹² Reviewing the situation in the autumn of 1906, *Country Life* observed that if ‘doubtless not a little poaching is carried out in certain districts, one may accept it as a truth that the game is not now worth the candle.’¹³

Within this general pattern of decline we see a much sharper drop in opportunistic day-time poaching than for its night-time equivalent – traditionally the domain of the more determined and ‘professional’ poachers. Although the evidence on the extent of gang-based poaching is mixed, the kind of recorded violence that was often linked to their activities was certainly reduced further [see Appendix 2: table 1]. We might reasonably assume, therefore, that a significant core of more committed, and experienced, poachers were still in circulation. As an elderly, but still active, Hampshire poacher declared in 1907: ‘So long as there is game the poacher will survive.’¹⁴ Working singly or in small groups, and not given to confrontation with keepers, these were just the kind of poachers that the wider culture could more easily assimilate.¹⁵ While dramatic accounts of pitched battles between poachers and keepers were still being reported, the frantic struggle and pursuit in William Haggar’s pioneering 1903 film, *A Desperate Poaching Affray*, was visually striking but not especially typical.¹⁶

¹¹ Kumar, *National Identity*, 176, 224.

¹² David S.D. Jones, *Gamekeeping*, 88.

¹³ *Country Life*, 18th October 1906, 535.

¹⁴ J.C. Bristow-Noble, ‘Confessions of a Poacher’, *C.B Fry’s Magazine*, November 1907, 148.

¹⁵ Between 1899 and 1913 prosecutions for day-time poaching declined by 42%. Those for night poaching declined by 12%. Calculated from BPP, L.449, 1920, *Judicial Statistics, England and Wales*, 1918,

¹⁶ Haggar was an English travelling showman. Shot in Wales the film was widely-circulated in both Britain and the USA.

Helped by the fact that in terms of reported crime the countryside had become much quieter, the culturally approved poacher offered an attractively organic contrast to the artificiality of the modern shoot and the ‘puffed-up host’ who strode amongst slaughtered game ‘like a Mohammedan conqueror’.¹⁷ With his deep roots in the past, mythical associations, and intimate contact with nature, the poacher was also a potential source of ‘re-enchantment’. It is no coincidence that the free-roaming ways of the gypsy were also now the focus of sympathetic interest.¹⁸ Here one might look to Mr Toad’s freshly discovered passion for the caravanning life in Kenneth Graham’s *Wind in the Willows* (1908), or to publications like *Songs of the Open Road: Didakei Ditties and Gypsy Dances* (a 1911 collection that included the poaching song ‘While the Gamekeepers Lay Sleeping’ / ‘Hares in the Old Plantation’).¹⁹ Recounting his 1902 journey through ‘Old England’, Alfred Austin opined how the countryside represented a ‘living protest against uniformity and preconceived or mechanical views of life.’²⁰ Conceived as an integral part of the landscape so admired by the poet laureate, the poacher himself offered a beguiling alternative to what others discerned as the increasing ‘stress and artificiality’ of the age.²¹

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first brings together the closely related issues of Edwardian game preserving and the intensifying debates about the future of the land. With the post 1906 Liberal governments making land reform a key part of their programme, attacking the preservers of game in word, if not deed, was an important element in the intensifying struggle against landlordism [Fig. 4.1]. As F.M.L. Thompson once observed, and as more recent scholarship has concurred with, the significance of the Land Question should be judged less on its limited legislative outcomes than on its powerfully ‘talismanic’ qualities.²² Given the symbolically loaded nature of the Edwardian Land Question, representation was therefore all important. Within this rhetorical struggle for the land, ideas attaching to the Norman Yoke, and the

¹⁷ T.A. Coward, ‘Game Preservation and its Relation to the Protection of Birds’, *Westminster Review*, May 1904, 566.

¹⁸ Epstein Nord, *Gypsies*, ch. 5. A similar point has been made for Edwardian tramps. See M.A. Crowther, ‘The Tramp’ in Roy Porter (ed.), *Myths of the English* (London, 1992), ch. 4.

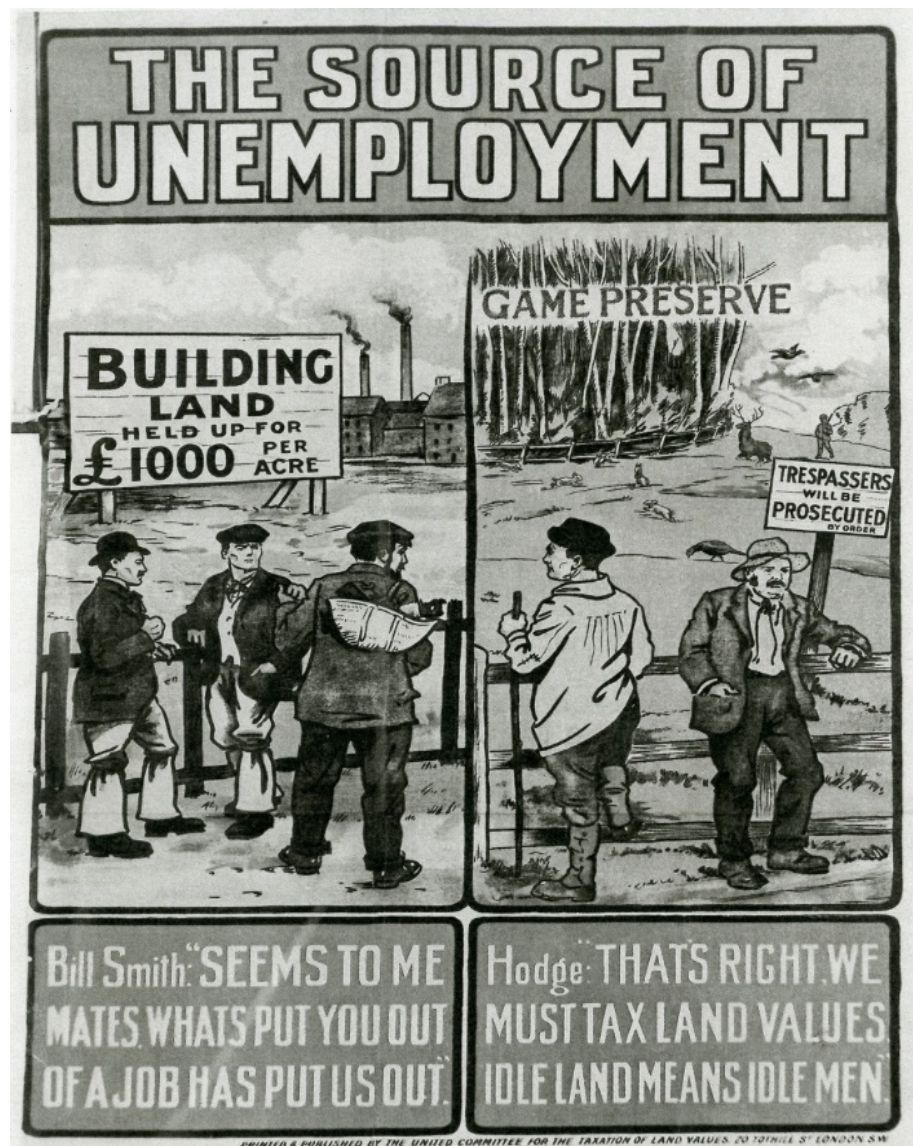
¹⁹ Alice E. Gillington and Dowsett Sellars, *Songs of the Open Road: Didakei Ditties and Gypsy Dances* (London, 1911), 20-21.

²⁰ Alfred Austin, *Haunts of Ancient Peace* (London, 1902), 21.

²¹ *Pearson’s Magazine*, 1907, quoted in Peter Broks, *Media Science Before the Great War* (Basingstoke, 1996), 80.

²² F.M.L. Thompson, ‘Land and Politics in England in the Nineteenth Century’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 15 (1965), 23, 34, 39. And see Cragoe and Readman (eds.), *Land Question*.

subsequent dispossessions through enclosure, maintained their influence on a large body of opinion.



4.1 Poster produced by the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values for the London county Council Elections, March 1910. Image courtesy of MERL, University of Reading.

Contained within these notions of loss and needful restitution we have the context for the 'Hammonds' poacher'. Developing out of the kind of men to be found in the work of John Bedford Leno and Edward Carpenter, here we have the poacher as an openly dissenting force against the continuing monopolisation of the land and its resources. If not to be taken as a consciously organised campaign, against the wider setting of the Edwardian Land Question there was a noticeable convergence of poacher representations (and indeed self-representations) of this type. Although not published

until 1961, it is worth noting that James Hawker's celebrated account of a politically engaged Victorian poacher was written in 1904/5 and that in 1910 he was to be found campaigning for the Liberal cause in Leicestershire. Expressing sentiments that would later be found in Hawker's work, for the West Country labourers encountered by Christopher Holdenby in 1913, to poach was a form of 'just reprisal' and meant nothing less than 'carrying the war right into the enemy's country'.²³

The second part of the chapter centres on the idea of the poacher as a distinctive national character. More diffuse than the above set of representations, these might usefully be thought of as 'Kipling's poacher'. Here we see a clear emphasis on the poacher's established characteristics of native wit and skill in woodcraft. In addition, his potential for humour and for 're-enchantment' are also highlighted, as are his fighting qualities. At a time when Englishness was widely perceived as being 'rooted in locale', the poacher could be presented as an authentic (and authenticating) part of the landscape.²⁴ In the age of the 'ostentatious parvenu ... squatting on unfamiliar soil', the local man who netted or wired or used his skill with an air rifle or cleverly adapted gun had an obvious appeal.²⁵ The poacher may have been on the wrong side of the law, but he also represented a kind of backhanded integrity, a rejection of the growing commodification of country life and a restatement of a truer sporting instinct. The eponymous hero in Cutcliffe Hyne's 1902 novel, *Thompson's Progress*, has made a fortune in business and been raised to the peerage. However, Thompson's real achievement is that he remains an active and skilled poacher. In the words of an admiring local rabbitier: 'for knowing where the birds is, either on the moor or in covert, and for being able to get at them, there isn't his equal' [sic].²⁶

Also informing this representational strand was the war that literally marked the divide between two ages. With existing fears at the degenerative effects of urbanisation confirmed by the poor performance of city-bred recruits in South Africa, 'the return to nature', notes Peter Broks, became 'of imperial importance.'²⁷ In addition to impressive levels of marksmanship, honed in the pursuit of properly wild game, another reason posited for the effectiveness of the Boer militiamen was their excellent knowledge of

²³ Christopher Holdenby, *Folk of the Furrow* (London, 1913), 49.

²⁴ Edwards, 'Photography', 69.

²⁵ Alex Innes Shand, *Shooting* (London, 1902), 302.

²⁶ Cutcliffe Hyne, *Thompson's Progress* (London, 1902), 292.

²⁷ Broks, *Media Science*, 131.

the surrounding countryside. ‘Rolled over like rabbits’ was how one senior officer described the fate of his men to the Royal Commission set up to investigate British failures.²⁸ Whilst imperialists like Kipling openly questioned the military value of organised field sports, there was little disagreement as to the military benefits of having men who were familiar with the land. In a series of articles on the ‘Defence of the Empire’, A.W.A. Pollock attributed the army’s recent difficulties to the ‘natural aptitude’ for soldiering ‘having perished’ through urbanisation.²⁹ But, continued the Lieutenant Colonel,

Suppose a regiment officered exclusively by country gentlemen and recruited solely from gamekeepers, Highland ghillies, and poachers, or from colonials bred up in country areas; such a regiment would only need to become disciplined, and to learn a few simple manoeuvres, in order to furnish a fighting machine capable of beating thrice its numbers of our own or of any army in the world.³⁰

If the countryside needed its poachers, then so too, it seemed, did the country at large.

The final part of the chapter develops our consideration of ‘Kipling’s poacher’ as we briefly examine the years of the First World War. Again, the idea of the poacher as a national character is much in evidence as we see his unique skill-set and widely assumed fighting qualities transferred to the principal fields of conflict. In a way that Pollock would have been pleased to note, both gamekeepers and poachers would reportedly serve with distinction.³¹ Having seen action on the Western Front with the Norfolk Regiment, the novelist R.H. Mottram later recalled how the men with experience of poaching were especially good on night patrols and in scouting the surrounding area.³² Whatever his military value, the poacher’s presence in the trenches created a powerful image of national unity. Writing on ‘War and the English Countryside’ in the summer of 1915, S.L. Bensusan told readers of the *Windsor Magazine* that ‘A welcome result of the war has been a collapse of class distinction ... The poacher, resolved to find a new character and to his exercise his love of adventure

²⁸ Spencer Jones, ‘“The Shooting of the Boers was Extraordinary”: British Views of Boer Marksmanship in the Second Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902’ in Karen Jones, Giacomo Macola, David Welch (eds), *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire* (Farnham, 2013), 259-60.

²⁹ A.W.A. Pollock, ‘The Defence of the Empire’, *Nineteenth Century*, May 1905, 752.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Caroline Dakers, *The Countryside at War, 1914-18* (London, 1987), 17.

³² See Hugh Cecil, *The Flower of Battle: How Britain Wrote the Great War* (South Royalton, Vermont, 1996), 118.

for his country's good, may find himself in a trench next to the magistrate who sentenced him'.³³

If the First World War marked the 'historical moment' when the vocabulary of the 'home front' entered common usage, central to this wartime discourse was the idea (ideal) of the English countryside.³⁴ Running against the idea of an essentially quiet and settled countryside, the demands of war meant that in reality there was considerable disruption and change. In a way that pre-war land reformers could barely have hoped for, the State was inexorably drawn towards the direction of agricultural policy as land was increasingly returned to the plough.³⁵ 'It must be clearly understood that ... waste of good land on game or games is inconsistent with patriotism', declared the Selborne Committee's report on agriculture in January 1917.³⁶ In the same month the field sports community accepted without demur a ban on the feeding of grain to pheasants, and in February tenant farmers were given the right to kill winged game.³⁷ With the politics of the Game Laws apparently resolved in favour of wider society, and with recorded levels of poaching further declining, the idea of the poacher as a national character gained an even firmer footing. As Kipling put it when discussing 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' in a speech given at the Mansion House in January 1915, 'You know the words ... There is nothing in it except – except all England.'³⁸

Village Hampdens: the 'Hammonds' Poacher'

In her 1980 novel, *The Shooting Party*, Isabel Colegate used a pre-war gathering on Sir Randolph Nettleby's Oxfordshire estate as a metaphor for the coming cataclysm.³⁹ The message is far from subtle, but the author's depiction of a high-end pheasant shoot is nonetheless well observed. With twice as many gamekeepers as police to be found in the more heavily preserved areas, and with more 'guns' shooting more game than ever

³³ S.L. Bensusan, 'The War and the English Countryside', *Windsor Magazine*, June 1915, 72.

³⁴ Susan R. Grayzel, 'Nostalgia, Gender and the Countryside: Placing the "Land Girl" in First World War Britain', *Rural History*, 10 (1999), 156.

³⁵ Howkins, *Rural England*, ch. 10; Horn, *Changing Countryside*, 246-42.

³⁶ BPP, Cmd. 8506, 1917, *Report of the Agricultural Policy Sub-Committee*, 16.

³⁷ *Field*, 20th January 1917, 17th March 1917.

³⁸ *The Times*, 28th January 1915.

³⁹ Isabel Colegate, *The Shooting Party* (London, 1980). The book was made into a successful film.

before (or since), this was truly the age of the ‘Big Shots’.⁴⁰ While the mechanics of modern game-shooting had already been perfected, what had changed was the scale of destruction involved. According to one contemporary estimate, the total amount of game shot in 1912 was fifteen times that for 1860.⁴¹ But if well-known estates like Elveden, Sandringham and Abbeystead led the way in terms of social cachet and abundance of sport to be had, their profile and status has had a distorting effect. Although all the relevant statistics were at record levels, a great deal of shooting was done on less elaborate, or socially exclusive, terms.⁴² If the army officers who formed the Shikar Club in 1908 were repelled by the ‘squandered bullets and swollen bags ... hot luncheons and gun loaders’, this was not the whole story.⁴³ To go shooting was not necessarily to mix with peers or plutocrats. However, not only does this remain the abiding image of the Edwardian shoot, despite the efforts of those who would defend it, this was largely the view at the time.⁴⁴

Addressing a pre-election rally at the Albert Hall in December 1905, and with clear echoes of Joseph Chamberlain twenty years before, Henry Campbell Bannerman called for the countryside to be made ‘less a pleasure ground of the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation.’⁴⁵ Though we must be careful not to suggest that all Liberals shared this view, it clearly suffuses *To Colonise England*, the 1907 collection of essays edited by the newly elected Liberal MP and social thinker, Charles Masterman. Introduced by A.G Gardiner of the *Daily News*, and containing a number of suggestions for the future direction of land reform, the tone is set by Gardiner’s poem at the start of his contribution. In words that might have come from the pen of Ernest Jones half a century earlier, we read how ‘The Squire has woods and acres wide, / Pheasants and fish and hounds beside’. With the labourer contrastingly doomed to the workhouse, the

⁴⁰ Johnathan Ruffer, *The Big Shots: Edwardian Shooting Parties* (London, 1984).

⁴¹ Brander, *Hunting and Shooting*, 121; Pollock, ‘Game Laws’, 321-22.

⁴² Mark Rothery, ‘The shooting party: the associational cultures of rural and urban elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ in Hoyle (ed.), *Hunting Fathers*, 103; John Martin, ‘The Transformation of Lowland Game Shooting in England and Wales in the Twentieth Century: The Neglected Metamorphosis’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29 (2012), 1142-46.

⁴³ Callum McKenzie, ‘The British Big-Game Hunting Tradition, Masculinity and Fraternalism with Particular Reference to the “Shikar Club”’, *Sports Historian*, 20 (2000), 75-76. On the wider tensions within the shooting community at this time see Wray Vamplew, ‘Sport Without Rules: Hunting, Shooting and Fishing on Edwardian Britain’, *European Studies in Sports History*, 2 (2009), 34-50.

⁴⁴ For a classic defence of game shooting see Aymer Maxwell, *Partridges and Partridge Manors* (London, 1911).

⁴⁵ Quoted in Roy Douglas, ‘God Gave the Land to the People’ in A.J.A. Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism: 1900-14* (London, 1974), 151.

poem concludes with the question: “How long, O Lord, shall the people be / Aliens in their own country?”⁴⁶ The squire is also encountered in a later contribution. On this occasion he is found speaking out against the ‘disgraceful’ 1906 Land Tenure Bill – a measure which had included proposals for tenant farmers to have greater use of firearms when dealing with ground game, plus the facility to claim compensation for damage caused by winged game.⁴⁷ Made subject to dozens of amendments by the Lords, a truncated version was eventually passed as the Agricultural Holdings Act (1906).⁴⁸

Exciting much heated debate at the time, the various controversies over the Land Tenure Bill were as nothing when compared to those stirred up by the land-taxing Budget of 1909, the ensuing clash between the Commons and the Lords, and the launching of the Land Campaign in the autumn of 1913. By this point, complained one irate peer, the politics of the pheasant appeared to be of greater import than the prospect of civil war in Ireland.⁴⁹ Playing the central role in all of this was the one of the ‘supreme masters’ of modern mass politics, David Lloyd George.⁵⁰ Supporting one historian’s claim that when it came to attacking landlords ‘Poaching and Liberalism agreed very well’, the poacher was given a prominent role within Lloyd George’s well-rehearsed platform drama.⁵¹ Just as the chancellor and future prime minister claimed of himself, the poacher stood for vested interests challenged and outmoded social structures undermined. Of ‘no more use than broken bottles stuck on a park wall to keep off poachers’, was his assessment of the Upper House in the wake of their rejection of his ‘People’s Budget’.⁵² But that was not all. Campaigning at the height of the crisis triggered by this action of the Lords, Lloyd George was reportedly making ‘boastful references’ about ‘his own exploits as a poacher of other people’s rabbits’.⁵³ To the consternation of the Conservative press, he had already alluded to his youthful poaching exploits in his speech at Newcastle in October 1909, in which he famously asked, ‘Who

⁴⁶ A.G. Gardiner, ‘A Song of the Land’ in Charles Masterman (ed.), *To Colonise England* (London, 1907).

⁴⁷ Athelstan Rendall, ‘A Parish Meeting’ in Masterman, *Colonise*, 143-4.

⁴⁸ *Liberal Magazine*, December 1906, 676-81; S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism, 1886-1914* (London, 1953), 497-498.

⁴⁹ *Liberal Magazine*, December 1913, 730.

⁵⁰ Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 105.

⁵¹ Offer, *Property and Politics*, 370-71.

⁵² *Spectator*, 11th December 1909.

⁵³ *The Times*, 5th December 1910.

made ten thousand people owners of the soil, and the rest of us trespassers in the land of our birth'.⁵⁴

In addition to their well-known depiction of Lloyd George as a highwayman, robbing wealthy motorists to fund old age pensions, it is no surprise that on several occasions during this period *Punch* represented him as a poacher, complete with ferret, dog and multi-pocketed jacket [Fig. 4.2].⁵⁵ Having formally launched the Land Campaign at a speech in Bedford in October 1913, the man whom the *Nation* compared to Cobbett in his ability to intuit 'general mind and thought', told his audience at the Holloway Empire in November how

You have no notion in the towns of the pagan thralldom that stifles liberty in our villages. The squire is god; the parson, the agent, the gamekeeper, they are his priests. The pheasants and hares, they are sacred birds and beasts of the tabernacle. The game laws, they are the Ark of the Covenant.⁵⁶

Undeterred by the ignominy of having a dead pheasant thrown at his head when attending the Oxford Union later in the month, Lloyd George returned to the poacher the following spring. Now criticising the Lords for their continued opposition to Irish Home Rule, he described their position as representing the 'new doctrine of optional obedience ... That is for the people at the top'. A Bakhtian before his time, the 'great Liberal Showman' clearly enjoyed delivering the punchline: 'Fashions have a habit of percolating down from the top ... and what may be the fashion for a duke to-day may be the fashion of a poacher tomorrow.'⁵⁷ Political knockabout it may have been, but as part of a high profile government campaign for reform, the idea of the poacher was brought further into the national culture. If in the dramatically polarised struggle against peers and landlords the former 'poacher's lawyer' was on the side of 'the people', then so too was the poacher himself.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 11th October 1909. *Daily Mail*, 14th October 1909. According to John Grigg, growing up in rural Wales the landlord hating Lloyd George was 'a leader on poaching expeditions'. Grigg, *Young Lloyd George*, 36.

⁵⁵ See also *Punch*, 22nd January 1913, 1st October 1913.

⁵⁶ *Nation*, 11th October 1913. Lloyd George quoted by George Lane-Fox, *Hansard*, 5th Series, 17th February 1914, 832-833. For Lloyd George as a 'poacher's lawyer' see Don M. Cregier, *Boulder from Wales: Lloyd George's Career Before the First World War* (Columbia, Missouri, 1976), ch. 2.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Michael Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land: the Response of the Labour Party to the Land Campaign of Lloyd George before the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 8 (1997), 133; *The Times*, 23rd March 1914.



4.2 *Punch*, 6th November 1912. The Land Enquiry Committee had been established by Lloyd George earlier in the year.

By the time that Lloyd George was leading his party's drive against the evils of landlordism and the associated iniquities of the Game Laws, another poacher-turned-politician had already been active in the field. In the 1915 collection of essays, *Killing for Sport* - which also included contributions by Edward Carpenter and the founder of the Humanitarian League, Henry Salt - we have 'Facts About The Game Laws' by Jim Connell. Best known today as the writer of the Labour anthem, 'The Red Flag', Connell wrote numerous political verses and pamphlets as well as the 1901 book, *Confessions of a Poacher*.⁵⁸ By the time the latter was written Connell, an early member of the Social Democratic Federation, was a journalist on the staff of the *Labour Leader* and comfortably settled in south London. However, the poaching he had learned as a boy in County Meath had continued into adulthood and his move to England in 1875. His entry

⁵⁸ J. Connell, 'Facts About the Game Laws' in Henry S. Salt (ed.), *Killing for Sport* (London, 1915), 69-84; J. Connell, *Confessions of a Poacher* (Dublin, 2004, first publ. 1901).

in *Labour's Who's Who* gave poaching as his recreation.⁵⁹ Establishing himself as an expert on the subject, Connell's first written offering on the Game Laws came in a Humanitarian League Pamphlet from 1898 which contained a foreword by Robert Buchanan.⁶⁰ The ideas in this pamphlet would be subsequently reworked and added to and would eventually form the basis for the essay included in *Killing for Sport*.

Reflecting the heterodox nature of its membership, the League adopted a flexible approach to humanitarianism and in its many attacks on field sports the issue of social class was often to the fore.⁶¹ This is certainly evident in the case of Connell. Whilst the 'horrors of the battue' are dutifully noted, the principal humanitarian issue to do with the Game Laws was their impact they had on the human population.⁶² To some extent anticipating Trevelyan's Access Bill, Connell claimed in 1902 that it was because of the Game Laws that those most in need were 'forbidden to breathe the pure air of the hills' and 'whilst vast areas' of cultivatable land were 'kept barren' millions struggled in overcrowded towns to make ends meet.⁶³ A Lewisham Hampden made flesh, the more political aspects of poaching had been a central theme in Connell's book-length account of the subject the previous year.

Based upon his regular poaching expeditions into Surrey and Kent, and invitingly advertised as the 'actual experiences of a living poacher', prior to its appearance in book form the *Confessions* were serialised in the popular weekly miscellany *Tit-Bits*, a publication that specialised in turning 'information into entertainment' [Fig. 4.3].⁶⁴ However, although selling well and running to a second edition, reviews of the book were somewhat mixed. Whilst the *Daily Mail* could enjoy the vivid accounts of night-time affrays that were deemed 'almost worthy of Stevenson', the *Manchester Guardian* contrasted the playful 'spirit' of the "Lincolnshire Poacher" with the 'systematic' and

⁵⁹ Andrew Boyd, *Jim Connell: Author of the Red Flag* (London, 2001); Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. x (Basingstoke, 2000), 52-6.

⁶⁰ J. Connell, *The Truth About the Game Laws: A Record of Cruelty, Selfishness and Oppression* (London, 1898).

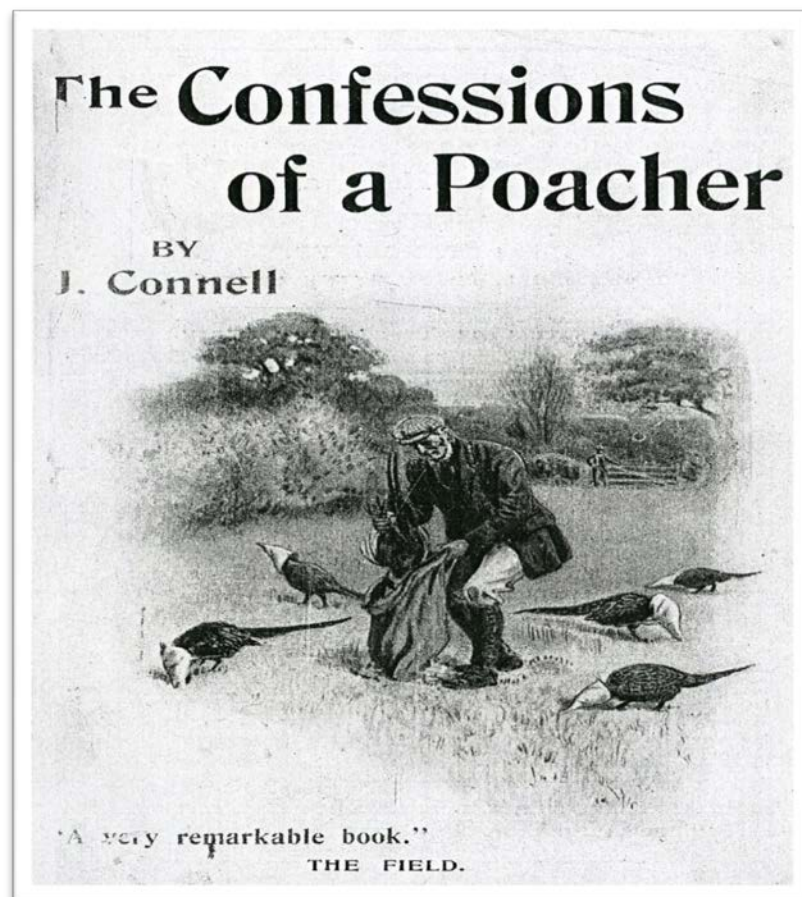
⁶¹ Dan Weinbren, 'Against All Cruelty: The Humanitarian League, 1891-1919', *History Workshop*, 38 (1994), 92-93; Griffin, *Blood Sport*, 170-75.

⁶² Connell, 'Facts', 82-84.

⁶³ J. Connell, 'The Game Laws', *Humane Review* ii (1902), 63.

⁶⁴ C. Arthur Pearson's new books list, *Athenaeum*, 6th April 1901, 448; David Reed, *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States, 1880-1960* (London, 1997), 88.

‘sordid’ ways of Connell and his associates.⁶⁵ Certainly, Connell did not shy away from the less appealing aspects of poaching, and men like the heavy-drinking Yallop are distinctly unsavoury characters, but at the same time the author was keen to stress the poacher’s high level of intelligence and organisational capacity. To emphasise these points considerable attention was paid to the admirable figure of the Kentishman Hyde - the ‘King of the Poachers’ - and to the Poacher’s Protection Fund that Connell himself had a part in organising.⁶⁶ Crucial to Connell’s understanding of poaching was that it was about more than simply providing an additional source of food or income. Of much greater significance was the combination of exciting sport and authority challenged that poaching uniquely offered. Furthermore, unlike those with a legal right to hunt game, poaching did not involve the kind of wholesale extermination abhorred by humanitarians like Salt.



4.3 Front cover of the 1902 edition. The quote from the *Field* is from its review of the book which drew attention to Connell’s skill with dogs. Drawn by S.T. Dadd, the man we see is Hyde – the ‘King of the Poachers’.

⁶⁵ *Daily Mail*, 8th January 1901; *Manchester Guardian*, 28th May 1901.

⁶⁶ Connell, *Confessions*, chs. 3, 32.

Also contained within poaching was the struggle against the morally and physically degenerate ‘crutch and toothpick brigade’ and the brutish and dim-witted gamekeepers they employed.⁶⁷ The poacher as an active participant in the political struggle was also evident in the petition that Connell and others sent to Parliament in the name of the Ancient Order of Poachers. Among its twelve points was the submission that ‘the chief difference between ourselves and orthodox sportsmen is in the clothes we wear’ and that ‘we take as keen an interest in the chase, and in all genuine sport, as do the Princes of the Blood, and perhaps keener.’⁶⁸ Although the document appears to have been completely ignored, in recounting the episode Connell was once more afforded the opportunity of advancing the poacher’s sporting and political credentials. Given to quoting from Kingsley, Connell was also fond of using Carlyle’s observation that the revolution of 1789 ‘was made by the poachers of France’. With the words of the great historian unanswerably quoted, the author closed his *Confessions* with the claim that if ‘troublous times’ arose closer to home, amongst those ‘likely to make their presence felt’ would certainly be the nation’s poachers.⁶⁹

Throughout these years the belief in Game Law injustice remained strong, even as prosecutions under them declined. On a number of occasions during this period the legal treatment of poachers was raised in the Commons, whilst early in 1911 *The Times* reported how a former Conservative MP was blaming his defeat at the recent general election on his service on the Bench in poaching cases.⁷⁰ Further supporting these perceptions we have the persistence of Game Law melodrama. *In the Shadow of the Night* and *Flying From Justice* both enjoyed successful revivals, whilst the dramatic sketch, *The Poacher’s Wife*, was still to be seen on the variety circuit.⁷¹ In addition to new dramas like *The Queen of Villainy* we also have the suggestively named ‘character vocalist’, Wat Tyler, performing ‘The Poacher’s Son’ along with popular musical satires like *The Kingdom Kennaquhair*.⁷² Focusing on the self-delusional Squire Addlepate - a man who dreams of living in the seventeenth-century – the show also

⁶⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 141-2.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁷⁰ See the Home Office correspondence at NA HO 144/838/145707; HO 144/1134/207057; *The Times*, 31st January 1911.

⁷¹ *Era*, 5th December 1903, 24th March 1906, 9th July 1906, 12th December 1908, 14th May 1910.

⁷² *Era*, 11th November 1905, 16th December 1905, 2nd January 1909.

poked fun at ‘the worship of titles, Game Laws, Enclosure of Commons [and] stopping of footpaths’.⁷³

Combining traditional stage practice with the projection of pre-filmed images, specialists in ‘sensation drama’ like Cecil Raleigh could also employ the Game Laws as a form of dramatic shorthand. In Raleigh’s *The Great Millionaire* (1901), the financier’s villainy is soon revealed by his attempt to suppress the poaching on his rented estate through the use of illegal mantraps.⁷⁴ The development of cinema itself, which theatre historians like Michael Booth see as the meshing of new technology with established demand for ‘pictorial realism’, also created a new outlet for Game Law dramas.⁷⁵ Following in the wake of Walter Haggard, leading producers of the day including Walturdaw, Hepworth and the Charles Urban Trading Co., made poaching-related films. In terms of the latter enterprise we have at least two examples, *The Poacher’s Daughter* (1907) and *A Day with Poachers* (1912).⁷⁶ As with many of these early films a print of *The Poacher’s Daughter* does not survive, but in the words of the *Era* it was ‘a melodrama of intense human interest ... It is amid lovely rustic scenes of forest and glade that this tragedy of defiance of the game laws, illicit affection, detection, and vengeance is laid.’⁷⁷ Although *A Day with Poachers* (in which two men poaching rabbits successfully elude the keepers) has little dramatic content, from the evidence available it appears that films such as *The Poacher* (1909), *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* (1909), *Revenge of the Poacher’s Wife* (1910) and *The Poacher’s Fight for Liberty* (1912), all contained strong melodramatic elements.⁷⁸ Men poaching to feed their families, fights with keepers, accidental deaths, last minute interventions and hidden identities are all recurring features here – a point neatly underlined by the recently discovered Mitchell and Kenyon film *The Poacher’s Revenge / Waiting for the Verdict*,

⁷³ *The Times*, 19th February 1909.

⁷⁴ Cecil Raleigh, *The Great Millionaire* (LCP Add. MS 65590); *Manchester Guardian*, 21st September 1901.

⁷⁵ Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre* (London, 1981), 14.

⁷⁶ *Bioscope*, 30th May 1912.

⁷⁷ *Era*, 17th August 1907.

⁷⁸ *Bioscope*, 20th May 1909, 25th November 1909, 3rd March 1910. Denis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue: Fiction Film, 1895-1994* (London, 2001).

which appears to be a loose adaptation of Colin Hazlewood's successful play from 1859 (see Chapter One).⁷⁹

If the latest developments in mass entertainment were helping to keep the workings of the Game Laws in the public eye, the same could be said for the developing sense of the national past. Combined with the associated interest in the life and ways of the English countryside, by the early twentieth century this constituted for many people 'a normative basis [for] conceptualisations of national belonging.'⁸⁰ When it came to modern understandings of the Game Laws, this popular sense of the past included a continuing belief in the Norman Yoke and a growing concentration on the more recent iniquities of parliamentary enclosure. If historians were now stressing the continuities between Anglo-Saxon and Norman systems of government, the idea of the Norman Yoke still had a role to play. The idolisation of the life and rule of King Alfred, and the widening dissemination of the tales of Robin Hood, are two clear examples of this.⁸¹ When it came to the latter, the Edwardian period saw a steady stream of theatrical adaptations and film versions of the legend, whilst numerous ballad collections and prose re-tellings brought the outlaw's adventures to a new generation of readers.⁸² Whatever form the story now took, the core representation was usually that of Robin as an Anglo-Saxon (English) resistor to foreign-bred oppression. An obvious way to show this was through having him successfully defy the Forest Laws – details of which could now be found in popular accounts of the nation's arboreal heritage such as *Our Forests and Woodlands* (1900) and *England's Woodlands and their Story* (1910).⁸³

Introducing his 1908 collection of Robin Hood ballads, Arthur Quiller Couch described how his subject 'stood forth the champion of a passionate belief, not yet extinct in the hearts of English countrymen, that the wild creatures of the forest, moor, and stream

⁷⁹ *The Poacher's Revenge* or *Waiting for the Verdict*, c.1910. As with Hazlewood's stage adaptation, a tableau of Solomon's well-known painting is featured. A copy of the film is held by the Cinema Museum in London.

⁸⁰ Paul Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture c.1890-1914, *Past & Present*, 186 (2005), 150.

⁸¹ On the development of Alfredism see Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 28 (1999).

⁸² Knight, *Robin Hood*, chs. 5-6.

⁸³ John Nisbett, *Our Forests and Woodlands* (London, 1900), 5-12; Houghton Townley, *English Woodlands and Their Story* (London, 1910), 2-4, 86-91.

were created for the use of all men, and not of the rich alone.’⁸⁴ Although as Emma Griffin observes, it is hard to tell which era of free hunting rights was in fact extinguished by the Conquest, against this prelapsarian ideal of Saxon freedom it was easy to set the deplorable actions of William whose ‘evil seizure of power by force led to other cruelties.’⁸⁵ Among the best known of these ‘other cruelties’ were of course the Forest Laws which, as we have seen, had long been equated to the modern ‘feudalism’ of the Game Laws. Journeying in the footsteps of William Cobbett in 1911, the agricultural historian and smallholder, F.E. Green, found an ‘empty’ countryside, the ‘natural sequence to a landowner’s policy of devoting square miles to the preservation of pheasants, and grudging square yards for the preservation of human life.’⁸⁶ As one Hampshire labourer told Green: ‘Why, we are like Robin Hood – outcasts, that’s what we are; outcasts in our own country.’⁸⁷

If the idea of Robin Hood helped to inform both Victorian and Edwardian views of the Game Laws, so too did the belief that Shakespeare had been caught poaching deer at Charlecote. Now seen by scholars as having a credible basis in fact, by the start of the twentieth century it was certainly the best known of the stories attaching to England’s greatest writer.⁸⁸ Anachronistic in terms of both historical periodisation and the principal quarry involved, the story could be neatly folded into a fully realised cult of the Bard in which a visit to Charlecote is ‘rarely ever omitted by the Shakespearean tourist’.⁸⁹ However, while it was not uncommon to view the episode as a display of youthful bravado from the days of Merrie England, the undermining of a system of laws that reserved designated animals and tracts of land for the pleasures of the few meant that the story also chimed with current debates about usage and access. If the street vendors of Edwardian Stratford reciting verses telling ‘All about Shakespeare’ - and which included how he ‘stole a deer out of Charlecote Park’ and ‘gave it to the poor people’ - were merely producing tourist kitsch, the message was still a powerful one.⁹⁰ A similar tension can be seen in Figure 4.4, one of a number of popular images

⁸⁴ A.T. Quiller Couch, *Robin Hood: Old Ballads Chosen by A.T. Quiller Couch* (Oxford, 1908), 2-3.

⁸⁵ Griffin, *Blood Sport*, 9; Valerie E. Chancellor, *History for Their Masters: Opinion in the English History Textbook, 1800-1914* (London, 1970), 72.

⁸⁶ F.E. Green, ‘An Empty Countryside’, *English Review*, September 1911, 334.

⁸⁷ F.E. Green, ‘The Tyranny of the Countryside’, *English Review*, October 1912, 476.

⁸⁸ René Weis, *Shakespeare Revealed: A Biography* (London, 2007), ch. 5.

⁸⁹ Charles G. Harper, *Summer Days in Shakespeare Land* (London, 1912), 114.

⁹⁰ Christian Tearle, ‘Rambles with an American’, *Temple Bar*, November 1903, 631.

depicting the dramatic moment that the poaching Shakespeare was brought before Sir Thomas Lucy.



4.4 Postcard reproduction of the nineteenth-century painting by Charles Cattermole c.1905. A typical souvenir from Shakespeare's Stratford. Between 1880 and 1910 the number of people visiting his birthplace saw a fourfold increase.

Although a tradition of positioning Shakespeare on the side of 'the people' and linking his deer-stealing activities to those of Robin Hood was already well established, it was not until the Edwardian era that the more political aspects of the story reached their mature form.⁹¹ Linking Shakespeare's alleged offence with 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', the well-known lawyer and antiquarian, Charles Isaac Elton, explained how 'Many people ... are pleased at thinking how valiantly the keepers would be encountered on "a shiny night."' ⁹² Placing strong emphasis on Lucy as an active preserver and enforcer of the laws protecting game, a typical 1906 account of *Shakespeare's Town and Times* wrote how 'Game preservers were ever unpopular in rural England' and that news of Lucy's proposal had a strong effect on local feeling (he had unsuccessfully tried to make poaching a more serious offence).⁹³ In this telling of the story, Shakespeare is no

⁹¹ A. Taylor, 'Shakespeare and Radicalism', 363-64; Paul Franssen, *Shakespeare's Literary Lives: The Author as Character in Fiction and Film* (Cambridge, 2016), 78.

⁹² Charles Isaac Elton, *William Shakespeare His Family and Friends* (London, 1904), 39.

⁹³ H. Snowden Ward and Catherine Weed Ward, *Shakespeare's Town and Times* (London, 1906), 110.

longer just a sixteenth-century youth out for a bit of nocturnal adventure, but is cast in the role of potential village Hampden. Following Lucy's actions in Parliament it was 'possibly Will Shakespeare [who] was a leader in some lawless demonstration.'⁹⁴

The previous year the *Speaker*, a journal which under J.L. Hammond's editorship was consistently critical of the Game Laws, gave a favourable review to Richard Garnett's play, *William Shakespeare: Pedagogue and Poacher*.⁹⁵ This courtroom drama carries a distinct political charge which once again locates Shakespeare's poaching within a broader context of social protest. Addressing Lucy directly, the defiant poacher asks:

Deem you that I had robbed you of your deer / If you had taken nought from me and mine? Wrongful the deed, I own, worse the example ... How many commons have you not devoured? What paths not barred? Where erst the villager was used to trip, but now slinks sullen, conscious / Both of his trespass and your injury, / And all for your game's sake.⁹⁶

Having turned-tables and laid the indictment against Lucy, and by extension all game preserving landowners from the sixteenth century to the present, Garnett has Shakespeare offer an alternative vision:

Would'st thou hearken / My friendly suasion, some kind passages, / Some acres of filched common given back, / Some paths unstopped ... Some gifts dispensed as duty, not as dole, / Some genial largesse from thy parks and warrens, / Some boons to recompense the ravaged crops, / Some mingling with the people's sports and pastimes, / And on the seat of justice, should'st thou strain / The letter of the law at all.⁹⁷

When a feature-length film on the life of Shakespeare was produced in 1914, the poaching episode at Charlecote was duly included. Film-making and exhibition had come a long way since the days of travelling showman like Haggard, and the cinema was now an established part of the entertainment industry. In line with the growing trend towards films of greater length and complexity, designed in part to draw a more 'respectable' audience, *The Life of Shakespeare* was a generously budgeted five-reeler.⁹⁸ Taking the role of Sir Thomas Lucy was George Foley, an actor who specialised in playing villainous types. Consciously or not, within a piece of early heritage cinema which boasted 'some of the most beautiful and typically English scenes' yet filmed, a clear distinction was again being made between the 'good' poacher

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Speaker*, 11th February 1905, 470-71.

⁹⁶ Richard Garnett, *William Shakespeare, Pedagogue and Poacher* (London, 1904), 88.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁸ British and Colonial Kinematograph Co., *The Life of Shakespeare*, 1914. See Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (London, 1968), 202-06. A reel of film is approximately 15 minutes of screen time.

and the ‘bad’ preserver of game.⁹⁹ Towards the end of the film Shakespeare is shown dreaming of a number of his best-known plays including *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In this comic depiction of English country society Lucy is imaginatively recast as the pompous Justice Shallow who fails to have Sir John Falstaff prosecuted for poaching in his park.¹⁰⁰ With its recognisably provincial setting, references to the Robin Hood stories and employment of the carnivalesque figure of Falstaff, the play was popular with Victorian and Edwardian audiences. Between 1897 and 1916, it was staged in every year but two at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford.¹⁰¹ In the opinion of Sir Henry Irving, it was because Shakespeare had once been a poacher that he was able to make Falstaff such a ‘hoary but loveable scamp.’¹⁰²

If in modern eyes the clash with Lucy helped to authenticate the life and work of Shakespeare as being that of a true born Englishman on the side of the commonality, the incident might equally be used to validate the idea of the poacher.¹⁰³ ‘It is at once apparent that the poet was a countryman’, claimed S.L. Bensusan in his 1910 account of Shakespeare’s early life, and that

It seems clear that the story of his poaching expeditions ... is not a mere legend unsupported by facts. Sir Thomas Lucy ... was of course a game preserver, and Shakespeare must have thought that poaching was a reasonable pastime enough. He dared ‘do all that becomes a man’, and the penalty of exciting the wrath of a great landowner and game preserver was no less then than now ... The response was a persecution that made Stratford too hot to hold a greater man than all the big sportsmen from Nimrod’s day to ours.¹⁰⁴

With real or mythical aspects of the deep past offering a useful source for early twentieth-century critiques of the Game Laws, numerous accounts of their more recent operation were also drawing attention to their manifold injustices.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, novels expressing strong anti-Game Law sentiment like *Yeast* and *Marcella* continued

⁹⁹ *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 12th February 1914.

¹⁰⁰ On the play’s politics and use of the Robin Hood legends see Jeffrey Theis, ‘The “Ill Kill’d Deer”’: Poaching and the Social Order in the Merry Wives of Windsor’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Languages*, 43 (2001), 47-53.

¹⁰¹ Carol Chillington Rutter, ‘Shakespeare’s popular face: from the playbill to the poster’, in Shaughnessy (ed.), *Shakespeare*, 257.

¹⁰² *Era*, 22nd March 1902.

¹⁰³ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2002), 113.

¹⁰⁴ S.L. Bensusan, *William Shakespeare: His Homes and Haunts* (London, 1910), 3,12-13.

¹⁰⁵ See for example, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act* (London, 1906); Gilbert Slater, *The Making of Modern England* (London, 1913). For more populist accounts see Miller Christy, ‘Mantraps and Spring-Guns’, *Windsor Magazine*, May 1901, 695-702; ‘The Thurgoods, Poachers’, *Famous Crimes* no. 122 (London, c.1903-5): BL Barry Ono Collection.

to find readers. Adding further to this weight of historically centred criticism were new biographies of John Bright and William Cobbett.¹⁰⁶ In line with the growing demand for books on the English countryside, various editions of *Rural Rides* also appeared at this time, including a two-volume set in the recently established Everyman's Library. If on the one hand it was now possible to read Cobbett as a doughty eccentric from a vanished world, his 'fiercely pugilistic style' could pack a modern punch.¹⁰⁷ Very much speaking to present concerns were his numerous allusions to the Norman Yoke, the effects of enclosure, and the economic and human cost of the preservation of game. With the Poaching Prevention Act still condemned by respectable opinion as 'un-English', Cobbett's Edwardian readers might well have appreciated the following passage:

I saw, not long ago, an account of a WEN police-officer being sent into the country, where he assumed a disguise, joined some poachers (as they are called), got into their secrets, went out in the night with them and then (having laid his plans with the game-people) assisted to take them and convict them. What! is this England? Is the land of 'manly hearts' ... What! are police-officers kept for this?¹⁰⁸

But by far the most important contribution to Edwardian thinking on the historic wrongs of the Game Laws - and by extension the problems that they continued to cause - was the Hammonds' celebrated work on the English countryside between 1760 and 1832, *The Village Labourer*. Described by John Masefield as a 'brilliantly written social tragedy' and 'one of the really big things in liberal thought of recent years', at the heart of *The Village Labourer* was the collapse of agricultural communities under the pressure of parliamentary enclosure.¹⁰⁹ In effect, the Hammonds did in historical prose what Clare - his own work now subject to a degree of rediscovery - had earlier done in verse.¹¹⁰ Occupying the 'narrow space between liberalism and social democracy', in their progressively-minded commitment to portraying the 'realities' of the labourer's plight as sympathetically as possible, the Hammonds can be compared to the men of the

¹⁰⁶ G.M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1913); E.I. Carlyle *The Life of William Cobbett* (London, 1904); Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Cobbett*, (London, 1913).

¹⁰⁷ James Grande, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate* (London, 2014), 7-10.

¹⁰⁸ Jesse Collings, *The Colonisation of Rural Britain*, vol. ii (London, 1914), 426; William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* vol. i (London, 1912, first published 1830), 228-29.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), 155.

¹¹⁰ Mark Storey, *John Clare: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1973), 298-319.

British documentary film movement of the 1930s and their consistent belief that ‘the working man can only be a heroic figure’.¹¹¹

Fusing the iniquities of enclosure with those of the Game Laws, and the further enclosure of land for the purpose of increased game preservation, in the Hammonds’ view the poacher also became a heroic figure. One of the ‘favourite Don Quixotes of the village’ who had ranged against him ‘not merely a bench of game preservers, but a ring of squires, a sort of Holy Alliance for the punishment of social rebels.’¹¹² Writing of woodland ‘packed with tame and docile birds’ and the maintenance of ‘armies of gamekeepers’, their account of life in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, had a decidedly modern feel and served as an impassioned call for the authorities of the present to address the continuing wrongs of the past.¹¹³ Dismissed by the historian and future President of the Board of Agriculture, Rowland Prothero, as ‘not a history but a political pamphlet’, there is no denying the literary power of one of the best-known passages of the book:

Village society was constantly losing its best and bravest blood ... when its poachers were snapped up by a game preserving bench, and tossed to the other side of the world. During the years between Waterloo and the Reform Bill the governing class was decimating the village populations on the principle of the Greek tyrant who flicked off the heads of the tallest blades in his field; the Game Laws, summary jurisdiction, special commissions, drove men of spirit and enterprise, the natural leaders of their fellows, from the villages where they might have troubled the peace of their masters. The village Hampdens of that generation sleep by the shores of Botany Bay.¹¹⁴

With transportation ballads like ‘Van Diemen’s Land’ and ‘Young Henry the Poacher’ still in circulation, and with enclosure casting ‘a long shadow’ over Edwardian debates about the land, it is no surprise that for many interested parties *The Village Labourer* became a key explanatory text.¹¹⁵ It also had a major influence on the work of Lloyd George’s Land Enquiry Committee. Established in the summer of 1912, and including among its members the influential social investigator Seebohm Rowntree, the

¹¹¹ Stewart A. Weaver, *The Hammonds: A Marriage in History* (Stanford, 1997), 5; Stuart Hood, ‘John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement’ in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History* (London, 1983), 107.

¹¹² Hammonds, *Village Labourer*, 188, 194.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹¹⁴ *Times Literary Supplement*, 4th January 1912; Hammonds, *Village Labourer*, 238-239.

¹¹⁵ ‘Van Diemen’s Land’ was included by Lucy Broadwood in her *English Traditional Songs and Carols* (London, 1908). A version of ‘Young Henry the Poacher’ noted by Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1905 appeared in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* in the following year.

Committee produced a highly critical account of the Game Laws in its 1913 report.¹¹⁶ If in the case of the Hammonds ‘history was derived from present politics’, theirs was a history which pushed strongly towards seeing the poacher as an active, and ultimately positive, force for change.¹¹⁷ And if the Hammonds did not invent the idea of the poacher as village Hampden, they certainly brought it to a much wider audience at a time when such a representation was increasingly likely to gain traction. The point is clearly demonstrated by popular writers of the period like Keighley Snowden and George Bartram whose respective 1914 novels, *King Jack* and *The Last English*, both centred on the idea of the poacher-hero and tribune of the people. Although as with the Hammonds their work was set in the nineteenth-century past, as a reviewer of *The Last English* noted, the ‘reader’s eyes throughout are, with the author’s, on the present day.’¹¹⁸

As the title of Snowden’s work suggests, the heroic status of his Yorkshire poacher, Jack Sinclair, is never in doubt. By terming him an ‘outlaw’, Snowden was offering his subject as a latter-day Robin Hood. This Hampdenesque representation is immediately in evidence when we encounter the titular hero successfully defending the villagers from the squire’s agent who is attempting to block access to a communal water trough. In contrast to the agent, Mallet, ‘a rather fussy little man ... newly come into the dale’, the native Jack cuts a far more impressive figure:

He wore a cap, a faded green shooting-jacket with yellow horn buttons, and a pair of old brown velvet trousers tucked into Blucher boots. He was broad set, clean built, young, and handsome. A look of natural distinction, an air of valour and keen good humour, marked this dalesman out for some respect ... When he was seen their was presently a silence among the crowd.¹¹⁹

Advancing to the trough and filling a bucket, Jack tells the assembled crowd in words similar to the classic defence of the poacher, ‘We have a right to this water, that comes frae the moor-top down, free as God sends it’ [sic]. Nevertheless, warns Jack, in a society where ‘might’s right’ such rights of common must always be fought for.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Readman, *Land*, 145-154; *The Land: The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee* (London, 1913).

¹¹⁷ Teresa Javurek, ‘A New Liberal Descent: The “Labourer” Trilogy by Lawrence and Barbara Hammond’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999), 401.

¹¹⁸ *Athenaeum*, 14th March 1914, 377.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

Having established Sinclair in this wholly affirmative way, the rest of Snowden's story unfolds as a succession of picturesque adventures with King Jack always one step ahead of the authorities. Of much greater interest, however, is Jack's sympathetic relationship with the village schoolmaster, a Cambridge man whom the poacher visits when 'tired of the isolation of which he lived for the most part happy.'¹²¹ As we have seen, a key aspect to more positive representations of the poacher was the emphasis placed on his mental capacities. This was usually manifested in a well-developed native wit and cunning, or in a heightened sense and understanding of the natural world. But it might also take the form of a more self-interrogating and questioning outlook which incorporated the more abstract realms of books and ideas. In Algernon Gissing's *The Unlit Lamp* (1909), a novel that recounts the struggles of the rural poor in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the author placed the Cobbett-reading Gloucestershire poacher, Timothy Lampitt, at the heart of the story.¹²² If ultimately a victim of circumstance, the doomed Lampitt is a heroic as well as tragic figure – a man of 'depths and possibilities' and part of the ongoing struggle against 'relentless authority opposed to the claims of finer justice and humanity'.¹²³ Through his quiet friendship with the schoolmaster, such is clearly being suggested for Jack Sinclair. Responding to his question as to why an obviously accomplished man should be employed in such a lowly way, and confident that the poacher will understand, Clarke tells him that

I am a sort of Jesuit not known to Holy Church. I kindle discontents! It was a man in the same secret who taught his ABC to Jack Cade ... If I can teach a rough lad justice I go to sleep smiling. He may, for anything I know grow up to be another Hampden, and demand it ... You should come and sit with us. Really, I think that a man fighting as you are may need to look sometimes at children's faces ... I teach them to be fair and kind, so that they will hate unfairness and tyranny.¹²⁴

The sense of a tyrannised countryside is certainly at the heart of George Bartram's *The Last English*. Obviously drawn to the idea of the poacher, Bartram's debut novel, *The People of Clopton* (1897), offers spirited accounts of men like Jack Fowsey, the 'uncrowned king' of them, and the intellectually inclined Tom Wakelin who had 'read the history of every popular movement' and was always happy to explain the French Revolution.¹²⁵ At the heart of *The Last English* is the dramatic struggle between the

¹²¹ Ibid., 45.

¹²² Algernon Gissing, *The Unlit Lamp* (London, 1909).

¹²³ *Times Literary Supplement*, 29th July 1909, 279; *Athenaeum*, 7th August 1909, 151.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 50-51.

¹²⁵ George Bartram, *The People of Clopton* (London, 1897), 20, 48.

vindictive and politically corrupt squire, Sir Jarvy, and a local man, Steve Gaynor – otherwise known as the transported poacher ‘Black Stephen’. Reversing the sobriquet’s usual meaning, ‘Black Stephen’ is widely admired as the ‘king o’ the poachers i’ this county’ [sic].¹²⁶ Set in Tiptry in the fictional Midlands county of Cantramshire in 1840, we first learn of the poacher in his absence. As the young Matthew Burton learns from the local publican, Joe Plowright, ‘Sir Jarvy purged Tiptry of its manhood arter the fray o’ Cantram ... There never wer’ a villager worth his salt that didn’t chase the game by moonlight. Show me a village where there’s no poachin’, and I’ll be bound ’tis a place where the men go bandy-legged an wi’ their eyes bent on their toes’ [sic].¹²⁷

Fired by these words, and by a ballad celebrating Black Stephen’s many adventures, Burton decides on a poacher’s life too. He soon finds a natural ally in the form of the recently returned Gaynor. ‘A striking figure of a man and wearing a kind of sullen dinity’, the poacher is taken in by the villagers who in so doing earn the wrath of the squire.¹²⁸ Determined to ‘tame’ Gaynor and to punish the people of Tiptry, Sir Jarvy resolves to enclose the common. The poacher, needless to say, leads the resistance. Here he is helped not only by the villagers, but also by two Oxford graduates who are then travelling through the county. ‘That bearded Cade is a splendid fellow’, the more poetically minded Pleydell tells his Chartist supporting friend, ‘Your Charter would capture rural England as fire devours stubble, if there were half a dozen like him in every village.’¹²⁹ Having successfully thwarted the squire’s plans, Gaynor decides to leave England and with Burton and Plowright he makes to start for a new life overseas. Given that the Dominions were by now a major destination for those opting to leave the countryside, especially those ‘full of the capacity to produce wealth’, the point would not have been lost on contemporary readers.¹³⁰ ‘With a fair chance, in a new country’ observes Pleydell, ‘such people can never know failure. The loss is *here*’.¹³¹ The Hammonds could not have put it better.

¹²⁶ George Bartram, *The Last English* (London, 1914), 18.

¹²⁷ Bartram, *Last English*, 55-6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³⁰ Hugh Aronson, *The Land and the Labourer* (London, 1914), 20.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 343.

The Poacher as National Character: 'Kipling's Poacher'

Tradition and enchantment

In 1902 the Indian-born Rudyard Kipling chose to settle in a 'wonderful foreign land' by purchasing a seventeenth-century manor house in Sussex.¹³² Set within the heart of the Weald, Bateman's was close to the village of Burwash – a settlement known for its smuggling and poaching and forming part of what is now known as 1066 Country. Always something of an outsider, Kipling nevertheless had strong feelings for the land and its past and was determined to establish a connection with it.¹³³ With the advice of friends like Rider Haggard, the new 'squire' of Bateman's took an active role in managing his holdings and over time significant improvements were made. However, notes David Gilmour, 'his real contribution to the English countryside was his appreciation of its lore and its inhabitants' that soon became a major theme of his work.¹³⁴ Exemplifying just the kind of person that Kipling was hoping to find in rural Sussex was the elderly farm labourer William Isted: 'a poacher by heredity and instinct' who was more 'one with Nature than whole parlours full of poets'.¹³⁵ As well as becoming Kipling's 'special stay and counsellor', and occasionally given the job of keeping down the rabbits, Isted was the source for 'Master Hobden', the rustic sage who featured in a number of Kipling's best-known poems and stories of the period.¹³⁶

Demonstrating well the richness and complexity of Edwardian representations of the poacher are those that come directly from Kipling himself – a writer whose image of Edwardian England was 'at once unique and representative.'¹³⁷ In his poem 'The Land', for instance, we first learn how the current squire of Bateman's has 'rights of chase and warren, as my dignity requires'. Coming from a fierce opponent of Liberal tax and land reform, the lines that followed appear somewhat strange. 'I can fish – but Hobden tickles. I can shoot / but Hobden wires. / I repair, but he reopens, certain gaps, which, men / allege / Have been used by every Hobden since a Hobden / swapped a hedge.' And as the final line of the poem has it, 'For whoever pays the taxes old Mus' Hobden /

¹³² Quoted in Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling* (London, 1999), 346.

¹³³ David Gilmour, *The Long Recession: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling* (London, 2003), 167-68.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹³⁵ Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* (London, 1937), 182.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ John Batchelor, *The Edwardian Novelists* (London, 1982), 12.

owns the land.’¹³⁸ In part these words can be explained by their appearance in wartime (1917) when ideas of national community were necessarily running high. They might also be read through Kipling’s own divided nature - his ‘two heads’ - and his general disregard for field sports. Ultimately, however, in its ‘mystic realism’ the poem brings us closer to the idealised rural world of conservatives like Peter Emerson, than it does to supporters of land reform.¹³⁹

As both Emerson and Kipling seem to suggest, within a clearly defined hierarchy it should be accepted that those who lived and died on the land should poach on it. Kipling had made a similar point in the Puck stories in which the ancient fairy guide takes Dan and Lena on a series of historical journeys. Using the Sussex landscape as a backdrop, Kipling’s intention was not to write a conventional narrative of kings and queens and Acts of Parliament. But if eschewing chronology and precise detail, as part of a rurally-centred ‘regenerative mythology’ the establishment of a sense of historical continuity was central to Kipling’s project.¹⁴⁰ Designed to be read by both adults and children, the stories were initially serialised in the *Strand*, Kipling’s version of the past, as revealed through the magical intervention of the ‘oldest Old Thing in England’, was a projection of the enduring quality of the Nation’s values.¹⁴¹ In Kipling’s vision, the timeless past rooted the present and secured the future.

Aside from the children’s ancient fairy guide, the other recurring figure in the stories is Hobden. Although the keepers would have him ‘clapped in Lewes jail all the year round’, he remains their ‘particular friend’ whose ancestors, they are told, have known the land for centuries.¹⁴² It is this priceless knowledge that the poaching Hobden passes on to Dan and Lena as he shows them the woods and how to wire game. In sharp contrast there is Mr Meyer, a moneyed outsider and would-be sportsman whose clumsy efforts merely result in a beater being shot. In creating his version of the English past, in which continuity through the land was all, Kipling’s poacher and his hereditary instincts were an enriching and authenticating presence. By being on the land, and part of it, he gave it a much truer value than that which was recognised by the law. Here of course

¹³⁸ Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Land’ in *A Diversity of Creatures* (London, 1917), 66-68.

¹³⁹ The phrase comes from T.S. Eliot. *Times Literary Supplement*, 24th January 1942.

¹⁴⁰ David Trotter, ‘Kipling’s England: The Edwardian Years’ in Phillip Mallett (ed.), *Kipling Considered* (London, 1989), 59.

¹⁴¹ Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (London, 1951, first publ. 1906), 8.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 35, 196, 285.

Kipling was adding significantly to the trend in poacher representations decried by friends like Haggard. To return to Hobden and 'The Land': 'His dead are in the churchyard – thirty generations laid ... And the passion and the piety and prowess of his line / Have seeded, rooted, fruited in some land the / Law calls mine ... And if flagrantly a poacher – taint for me to / interfere.'¹⁴³ If the plans of the land-taxing 'Welsh thief', Lloyd George, were to be resisted at all costs, the old English poacher was to be viewed in an altogether different way.¹⁴⁴

The idea of the countryside as a storehouse for the clearest, and deepest, links with the past was also central to the work of cultural preservationist groups like the NPRA, the Folk-Lore Society (which Kipling joined in 1911) and the FSS. In terms of the latter organisation the decade before the First World War was the most productive in its history. Not only were thousands of songs gathered at source, but official policy on the teaching of music in schools was significantly influenced.¹⁴⁵ 'Folk-Songs are the expression in the idiom of the people of their joys and sorrows, their unaffected patriotism, their zest for sport, and the simple pleasures of country life' claimed a Board of Education circular in 1905.¹⁴⁶ Much of what the Board took to be intrinsic to folk-songs was clearly to be found in those concerned with poaching. Writing on *English Folk-Song and Dance* in 1915, Frank Kidson and Mary Neal observed how 'Poaching was a matter so near the class that sang folk-songs that as a subject it could not fail in interest' and that many remained 'well known in rural districts'.¹⁴⁷

Revealing the extent of poaching's continuing relevance - and the reach and penetration of the nineteenth-century ballad trade - all the leading collectors of the period noted poacher-themed songs. Taking 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' (or its regional variants) as the most obvious example, we find that between 1904 and 1912 Cecil Sharp collected versions in Somerset, Gloucestershire and Yorkshire; whilst in 1905 Henry Hammond found two variants in Dorset. In 1906 George Gardiner collected the same number in Hampshire.¹⁴⁸ Also in 1906, and again in 1908, Percy Grainger recorded versions on his

¹⁴³ Kipling, 'The Land', 67.

¹⁴⁴ Gilmour, *Long Recessional*, 217.

¹⁴⁵ Gammon, 'Folk Song Collecting', 74.

¹⁴⁶ Board of Education, *Suggestions for the consideration of teachers*. See the introduction to S. Baring-Gould and Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs for Schools* (London, 1906).

¹⁴⁷ Frank Kidson and Mary Neal, *English Folk-Song and Dance* (Cambridge, 1915), 65.

¹⁴⁸ Peter Kennedy (ed.), *FolkSongs of Britain and Ireland* (London, 1975), 584.

phonograph apparatus in Lincolnshire itself.¹⁴⁹ Aside from its inclusion by Edward Thomas in his 1907 anthology of songs and poems for the ‘open air’, ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’ also appeared in *The Minstrelsie of England: A Collection of English Songs* (1909) and continued to be published by Novello as part of its series of songs for schools.¹⁵⁰ In 1912 it was featured in the popular stage show, *Songs in a Farmhouse*, in which a suitably made-up cast of five delivered ‘Old English songs’ and ‘country stories’.¹⁵¹ The songs from the show were later published as *Songs in a Farmhouse: A Cycle of Traditional Songs*.¹⁵²

The life of physical activity in the open air that was soon to be developed by the Scouts (see below) was clearly articulated in a 1907 feature in *C.B. Fry’s Magazine* on the ‘Confessions of a Poacher’. Accompanied with photographs of men working with snares and nets and burning sulphur under pheasant roosts, the article is based on a conversation with a life-long Hampshire poacher over the course of a November evening. The setting is decidedly picturesque: the old man’s cottage is ‘thatched, snug, ivy-covered’ and the ‘silver-locked’ poacher and his interlocutor sit over a blazing log fire.¹⁵³ In keeping with the sporting ethos of the magazine, poaching is here presented as a ‘fine hobby – healthy and exciting’, and thanks to the abundance of the ‘good squire’s preserves’ a profitable one.¹⁵⁴ As with Walter Raymond’s account of the Somerset poacher, Dan Ibbett, whose ageing contemporaries feel ‘the sadness of a lack of anything heroic’ in their own lives, pervading the warm and smoky interiors from where these poachers regale their audience is a feeling of thrillingly illicit nights spent in the woods and the fields.¹⁵⁵

In addition to a sense of the poacher’s enviable place within nature, there is an obvious note of elegy. One of the most common tropes in poacher representations of the twentieth century is the notion of the current generation not matching up to those who have gone before. In terms of Edwardian sensibilities, the feeling of an epoch ending

¹⁴⁹ Roud Folksong Index hosted online by the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. Roud Number 299.

¹⁵⁰ Edmondstone Duncan, *The Minstrelsie of England: A Collection of English Songs*, vol. ii (London, 1909), 127.

¹⁵¹ *Stage*, 5th December 1912.

¹⁵² *Songs in a Farmhouse: A Cycle of Traditional Songs* (London, 1914).

¹⁵³ Bristow Noble, ‘Confessions’, 148.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Walter Raymond, *The Book of Crafts and Character* (London, 1907), 100.

with the death of Victoria also played into this. Symptomatic of this tendency is a 1901 editorial from *Country Life* on 'Poachers: Old Style and New' which claimed how 'the old village poacher, whom we all half liked, is almost extinct.'¹⁵⁶ The belief that this kind of poacher was part of a dying breed of countrymen whose loss was to be mourned was given literal expression in the *Field's* 1908 obituary for John 'Lordy' Holcombe, the well-known Devonshire poacher whose autobiography had appeared in 1901:

In spite of his persistent disregard of the game laws, his neighbours could not help liking him, while they admired his pluck and love and sport. Even the gamekeepers, whose business it was to circumvent him on his poaching excursions, were personally well disposed towards him.¹⁵⁷

Written under the guidance of the Oxford-educated antiquarian, F.J. Snell, the book was keen to emphasise the poacher's impressive ancestry and both Robin Hood and Shakespeare are referenced.¹⁵⁸ Used here, these links were designed to place the subject within the tradition of an older, and more robust, rural community. The point is further emphasised by the image chosen for the book's front cover in which the poacher could just as easily be seen as a ruddy-cheeked sporting squire [Fig. 4.5]. In her study of self-representation in nineteenth and early twentieth-century British writing, Regenia Gagnier sees the book as fitting the 'conservatively reminiscent' genre of the working-class picaresque which romanticises the 'carnival image of a past that seemed timeless'.¹⁵⁹ As a real life poacher-turned-gamekeeper, Holcombe was clear as to his personal politics: 'on public and private grounds I am a Conservative ... Liberals are hollow and turn like a weather cock ... Liberals care nothing for Old England, and would sell the country for a trifle.'¹⁶⁰

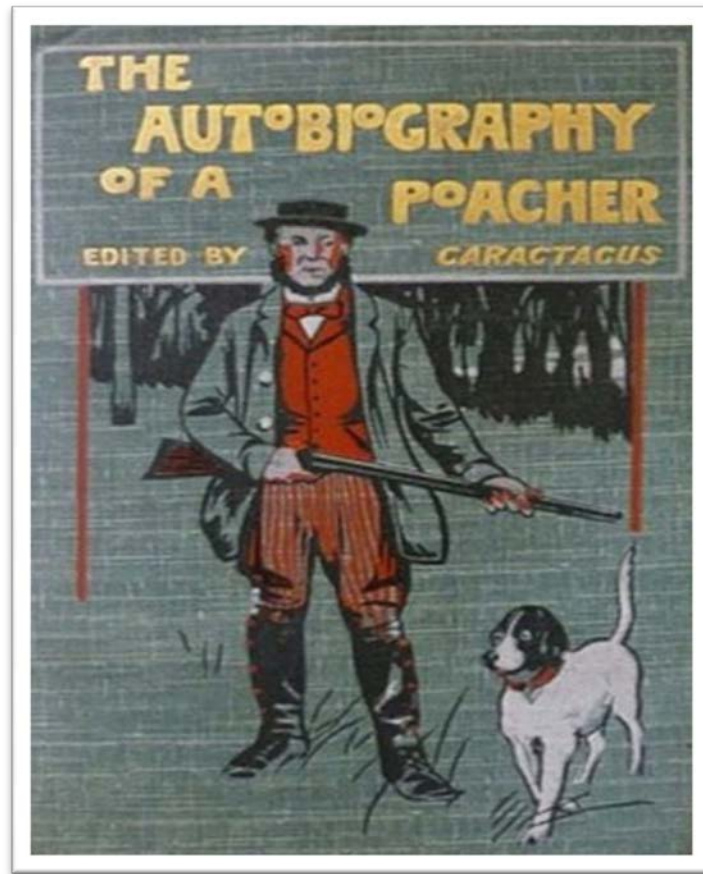
¹⁵⁶ *Country Life*, 17th August 1901, 194.

¹⁵⁷ *Field*, 23rd May 1908.

¹⁵⁸ Caratacus (ed.), *The Autobiography of a Poacher* (London, 1901).

¹⁵⁹ Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford, 1991), 155-57.

¹⁶⁰ Caratacus, *Autobiography*, 248. This refers to the modern edition of the book published by Halsgrove, Tiverton, in 2002.



4.5 Front cover to the *Autobiography of a Poacher*. Emphasising themes of historical continuity and patriotic freedom, Snell's pen-name of Caractacus was taken from the first-century British chieftan who led resistance to the Romans.

Having announced the imminent extinction of the old-time poacher in 1901, a decade later *Country Life* was declaring how the 'curious ne'er-do-wells, who were animated by a true, if misguided, love of sport' had not entirely quit the scene and that 'this type of man has by no means died out.'¹⁶¹ Whilst Dan Ibbett could be found wistfully commenting from his corner in the alms house, 'if I could but be young again', his Hampshire counterpart was bullishly declaring how 'the days of the poacher are not numbered'.¹⁶² A point strongly reiterated by this hardy 'son of the sod' as he took his middle-class readers through his working year in which he remained 'as crafty as a fox, and as wide awake as a weasel.'¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *Country Life*, 7th December 1912, 778-779.

¹⁶² Raymond, *Crafts*, 104; Bristow Noble, 'Confessions', 148.

¹⁶³ Bristow Noble, 'Confessions', 148.

According to the sportsman and nature writer, George Dewar, the ‘great spell which the earth casts over those that love it is never broken’.¹⁶⁴ An admirer of Richard Jefferies, Dewar’s countryside writings were often drawn to the secret and mysterious world of the Hampshire woods at night and to the poachers who frequented them – drawn, as he thought they were, by ‘something other than that of mere gain’.¹⁶⁵ The poem about a Herefordshire poacher’s spiritual journey that cemented John Masefield’s literary reputation, ‘The Everlasting Mercy’, was full of this sense of mystery and wonder. Having drawn on local folk-lore, in the words of one admiring review it appeared not to have been written at all but to have ‘grown like some beautiful natural growth of woods’.¹⁶⁶ Against mechanical illumination and the ‘hard fact of the fence’, the liminal and shadowy figure of the poacher had a ready appeal. If relatable to the ‘footpad’, he could also be grouped with ‘hobgoblins and fairies’.¹⁶⁷ Mostly confined to our ‘villa streets’, suggested Thomas Fortebus in 1901, ‘at the sight of a quiet wood on a dark, still night, the poacher stirs in the blood of many of us’ [Fig. 4.6].¹⁶⁸

Bearing the roots of ferns to ward off detection, or being ‘fetched-off’ by phantom coaches in the depths of the night, tales of the poacher had by now become an important source of ‘re-enchantment’.¹⁶⁹ In the first of his celebrated collections of ghost stories, M.R. James has a hanged Essex poacher return from the dead to wreak a terrible revenge on those responsible for his fate.¹⁷⁰ Also to be found in the work of Kipling, as well as in the folklorically-rich books in the Highways and Byways series (launched in 1897), Michael Saler regards this desire for re-enchantment as a conscious response to the apparent ‘disenchantment’ linked to the growth of industrial capitalism and its ‘instrumental rationality’.¹⁷¹ However, if the idea of the poacher and his ‘skilled cunning against law and order’ offered a potential way out of this state, a degree of

¹⁶⁴ George Dewar, *The Glamour of the Earth* (London, 1904), 1.

¹⁶⁵ George Dewar, ‘Winter in the Great Wood’, *Temple Bar*, December 1900, 448.

¹⁶⁶ *Daily Mail*, 13th October 1911; John Masefield, *So Long to Learn: Chapters of an Autobiography* (London, 1952), 189.

¹⁶⁷ John Hyde, ‘Open England’, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, February 1904, 156.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Fortebus, ‘Under the Stars’, *Argosy*, September 1901, 300.

¹⁶⁹ T.W. Couldery, ‘Matthew King’, *Leisure Hour*, March 1902, 419; *Famous Crimes*, 62 (London, c.1903-5): BL Barry Ono Collection; William A. Dutt, *Highways and Byways of East Anglia* (London, 1901), 208-10.

¹⁷⁰ M.R. James, ‘The Mezzotint’ in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (London, 1904).

¹⁷¹ Michael Saler, ‘“Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes”: Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c.1890-1940’, *Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 602.

ambiguity was often in play.¹⁷² If in some ways ‘enchanted’, the poacher’s nightly activities were also breaking the law and potentially still threatening. Reporting in 1903 on the search for the poachers thought to have murdered two keepers ‘on a lonely Yorkshire moor’, the *Daily Mail* went on to note how the county has ‘no wilder, no more desolate, spot’ and that for the ‘daring spirits’ who poached there ‘fascination is greater than the profit’.¹⁷³



4.6 Combining poaching’s deep traditions with ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’ and an enchanted setting of moonlit woods, we have S.E. Waller’s Christmas contribution to the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, December 1901. For an earlier example of Waller’s work on poaching see Chapter Three Fig. 3.4.

¹⁷² S.L. Bensusan, ‘A Night with Poachers’, *Windsor Magazine*, March 1904, 552.

¹⁷³ *Daily Mail*, 12th September 1903.

The more ambiguous sense of poacher-centred enchantment is nicely captured by a pair of articles that appeared in the *Spectator* on poaching in Shakespeare's Arden. Authored by the mysteriously named 'X', the two pieces were in fact a reshaping of material from George Morley's well-received book on country life, *In Russett Mantle Clad*.¹⁷⁴ Whilst in its literary associations the scene is pre-loaded with enchantment, on first sight the profit-seeking poachers are not at all promising. Having spent their time 'loafing' and 'lounging' and 'waiting for the day to die', the 'slouching brotherhood' gather in the Black Lane with their 'doomed, damned' dog before moving off to their chosen hunting ground. But out in the dark of Spinney Close a dramatic transformation occurs. The poachers become so silent and attuned to their surroundings that 'any intrusive watcher' might take their 'crouching forms' to be 'bodiless' and 'in some unearthly way, a special creation of mysterious Nature.' Netting rabbits with wordless expertise 'Mercury runs in their veins'. Meanwhile, their dog has become an 'imp of darkness' enjoying its own 'saturnalia of murderous power'. Having enjoyed a bountiful night in 'Shakespeare's greenwood', this 'unearthly' group silently retraces its steps.¹⁷⁵ Even here it would seem, Shakespeare's woods are the poacher's woods.

Native wit and humour

Thanks in part to the Charlecote legend, which in turn informed popular Shakespearean comedies like *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the notion of poaching as a traditional country pursuit was also now well established. Whilst clearly existing at an implied level, the connection between much-loved characters like Falstaff and his modern poaching counterparts might also be made explicit. A leading character in *When Life Was New*, Horace G. Hutchinson's 1911 account of his Devonshire boyhood, was the local poacher, Tom Causey. 'Broad and burly' and 'with a coat of velveteen, stained by much contact with Mother Earth', he was 'something of a Falstaffian figure.'¹⁷⁶ As the referencing suggests, and as Hutchinson goes on to relate, important to the poacher's

¹⁷⁴ Chapter 3, fn.118. For other examples of this ambiguity see C.L. Fletcher, *The Harvesters* (London, 1900) and S.L. Bensusan 'A Night with Poachers', *Windsor Magazine*, March 1904, 551-56.

¹⁷⁵ 'X', 'The Poacher's Lurcher: A Night Scene in Arden', *Spectator*, 9th July 1910, 51-52; 'Poaching in Warwickshire', *Spectator*, 4th February 1911, 177. The poacher's singular relationship to his dog was made much of at this time. See Bertram Atkey, 'His Lurcher', *C.B. Fry's Magazine*, March 1905, 588-89 and Owen Jones, 'Poachers and Their Dogs', *C.B. Fry's Magazine*, March 1910, 506-12. Kipling's Hobden had a lurcher called Bess.

¹⁷⁶ Horace G. Hutchinson, *When Life Was New* (London, 1911), 64-65.

cultural formation was the attendant possibility of comedy – not least in the practical mockery of authority that this inversion of legal hunting contained.

Along with the kind of anti-establishment position that the poacher could readily occupy, there were the larger than life - and indeed lowlife - sides to his character that could also be tapped for their comic possibilities. In a society that embraced humour as a benchmark of Englishness, to laugh with the poacher, often at the expense of the keeper, was not exclusive to those for whom the law was a remote and discriminatory force. If poaching was a useful ‘weapon of the weak’, the ‘transgressions of elite codes’ that it involved could be widely appreciated and enjoyed.¹⁷⁷ As with the popular comic character and ‘demotic hero’, Ally Sloper, it was possible to ‘know’ that the poacher was wrong while at the same time finding his actions amusing.¹⁷⁸ In this sense the idea of the poacher can perhaps be explained through the Don Quixote-Sancho Panza dualism explored by George Orwell in his essay on the comic artist Donald McGill.¹⁷⁹ Allied to this of course, was the belief that the poacher’s actions were the exercising of a natural, and deeply English, desire for the thrill of the chase. ‘I’m still a poacher at heart, and I suppose I always shall be’, confesses one of the sporting-gentlemen in Nicholas Everitt’s 1904 collection of tales, *Told at Twilight*.¹⁸⁰

The idea of the poacher as a bearer of native wit and humour was not of course new to the Edwardians, but it was certainly now given more attention. The representational journey of Otway Bethel, the poacher from *East Lynne* whom we encountered in Chapter One, is instructive here. In a reworking of this hugely popular melodrama Bethel’s narrative function remains unchanged. At the same time, however, he is now given a much greater part in the prologue where he forms something of a double act with the local postman. The running joke is that the poacher wants to get his companion ‘the sack’.¹⁸¹ Offering a ‘droll episode of country life’, *Gentlemen of the Road* (1909) sees three poachers con a motoring ‘parvenu’ into lending his car in order for them to escape the police. In Gertrude Robins’ *Pot Luck* (1910) a Buckinghamshire poacher and

¹⁷⁷ Scott, *Weapons*, 41.

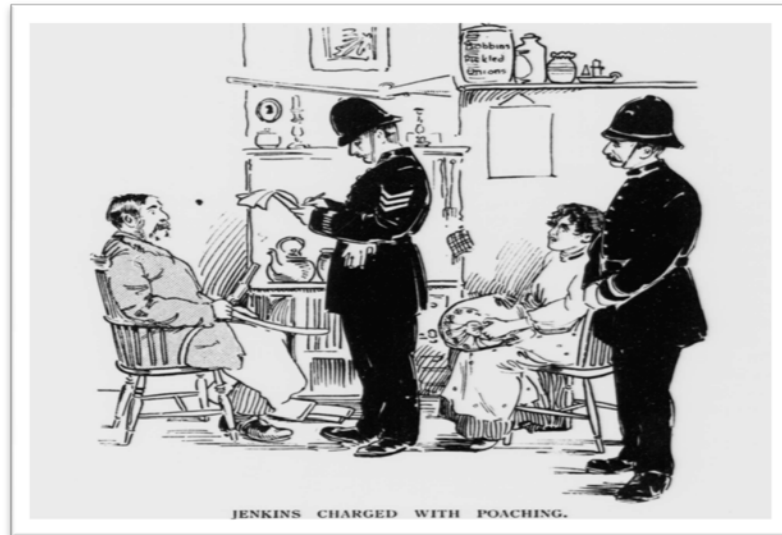
¹⁷⁸ Joyce, *Visions*, 309.

¹⁷⁹ George Orwell, ‘The Art of Donald McGill’ in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Letters and Journalism of George Orwell*, vol.ii (London, 1968), 162-63.

¹⁸⁰ Nicholas Everitt, *Told at Twilight*, London, 1904.

¹⁸¹ Eric Mayne, *East Lynne* (LCP, Add. MS 65871); *Observer*, 14th November 1909, *Era*, 18th December 1909.

his wife also get the better of the local constabulary.¹⁸² A product of the emerging village drama movement (though it was also performed professionally), the *English Illustrated Magazine* described the play as a ‘bright little slice of English rural life, full of raciness and fun’ [Fig. 4.7].¹⁸³



4.7 Scenes from *Pot Luck*, *English Illustrated Magazine*, February 1911.



Having concealed the pheasant by placing it in the pot, the poacher and his wife enjoy their ill-gotten dinner. If relatively few women are recorded as poaching themselves, in the words of the *Shooting Times* it was ‘as confederates to poaching that women shine ... A keen woman may be of the greatest use to a poacher’.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² *Era*, 16th October 1909; Gertrude Robins, *Pot Luck* (London, 1911, first performed 1910); *Era*, 12th August 1911.

¹⁸³ L. Allshorn, ‘The Buckinghamshire Village Players’, *English Illustrated Magazine*, February 1911, 460.

¹⁸⁴ *Shooting Times*, 23rd March 1907, quoted in Alastair Balmain (ed.), *125 Years of Shooting Times, 1882-2007* (London, 2007), 20.

Providing a window on to many of the themes attaching to Edwardian representations of the poacher we have the work of Eden Phillpotts. Best known today for his so-called Exmoor Cycle, this enormously productive ‘businessman of letters’ had a keen sense of the marketplace and routinely adapted plots or scenes from his most popular stories into plays.¹⁸⁵ With his easy-going accounts of West Country life populated with a familiar cast of characters, from early in Phillpotts’ career poachers figured strongly. In most cases they were used as a source of rustic colour or humour, though an obvious exception to this was the 1906 novel, *The Poacher’s Wife*.¹⁸⁶ Shifting from Devon to the West Indies, as an innocent poacher tries to clear himself of a murder charge, Phillpotts considered the work to be ‘trash’ and it was never reissued.¹⁸⁷ With his Board school learning and ‘large’ ideas, the young Daniel Sweetland was clearly not the kind of poacher that readers of Phillpotts expected or wanted.

Much more successful for the author was his creation of William Cawker / Moleskin – the loveable old poacher from the 1908 novel *The Mother*.¹⁸⁸ Originally published with illustrations by Gunning King, an artist who specialised in traditional country scenes, a suggestively Falstaffian image of the poacher appears as the frontispiece to the book [Fig. 4.8].

Regularly to be found in the Three Jolly Sportsman, an establishment he keeps well supplied with game, Moleskin is full of home-spun wisdom, such as ‘Women be a noble branch of larning’, and self-justifying one-liners. ‘There’s no such thing as poaching’, he tells an unloved local landowner, ‘Tis just a silly word invented by the rich against the poor. Sport be sport’ [sic].¹⁸⁹ Informing his literary agent of his idea for the story, Phillpotts explained that ‘There will be a large element of humour ... and I have various studies of rustic character in light and shade that cannot fail to please those who like my work.’¹⁹⁰ For experienced readers of Phillpotts, the presence of the ‘half-humourist, half-hypocrite’ poacher was clearly one of the best things about the book, sentiments

¹⁸⁵ James Y. Dayananda (ed.), *Eden Phillpotts: Selected Letters* (Lanham, 1984), 115.

¹⁸⁶ Charles William Meadowcroft, ‘The Place of Eden Phillpotts in English Peasant Drama’ (PhD thesis, Pennsylvania, 1924), 92. And see the early novel, *Some Everyday Folks* (London, 1894).

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Dayananda, *Phillpotts*, 150.

¹⁸⁸ Eden Phillpotts, *The Mother* (London, 1908). This was the seventh (out of 18) in the series of Exmoor novels. It was later turned into a successful play.

¹⁸⁹ Phillpotts, *Mother*, 23, 69.

¹⁹⁰ Quoted in Dayananda, *Phillpotts*, 152.

later echoed by reviewers of the various stage versions that ran between the wars.¹⁹¹

Here we encounter him for the first time, having just entered the village pub:

his eyes were still young and bright. Laughter made a home therein, yet heavy brows overhung them and the left eyelid half hid the iris. William Cawker had used his sight through the hours of darkness for so many years, that an eternal frown wrinkled the brows, and this physical accident belied a geniality that beamed from the rest of his face. He was a kind-hearted man ... He belonged to the old order and had learned his business from a father whose leg had been broken in a man-trap. Nobody ever called this grey-whiskered and humorous person Cawker. He was known as Moleskin.¹⁹²



4.8 The Edwardian poacher as Falstaff. Frontispiece to Eden Phillpotts, *The Mother*, 1908. Illustration by Gunning King.

Having earlier landed the son of the eponymous mother in trouble, we find the incorrigible Moleskin at the end of the book presenting Ives Pomeroy with a bunch of primroses. Returning us briefly to the world of enchantment, the blooms that are intended for the young man's bride have come from 'the hidden places of their earliest budding': a secret spot on the moor that will only ever be known to the poacher.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 30th January 1908, 37; *Academy*, 8th February 1908, 445; *Athenaeum*, 22nd February 1908, 221; *Era*, 29th October 1913, 2nd February 1916; *Play Pictorial*, January 1926, 10; *Manchester Guardian*, 2nd June 1934.

¹⁹² Phillpotts, *Mother*, 29-30.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 413.

Of all the guides to shooting and the Game Laws that were published during the Edwardian era, by far the most successful was Nicholas Everitt's *Shot's From A Lawyer's Gun*. Not only was the book written by a leading authority (the Norwich-based Everitt was Honorary Secretary to the Field Sports and Game Guild) it was generously illustrated and full of humour. An accomplished writer and sportsman, Everitt's conceit was to employ a range of fictional types drawn from the world of shooting estates and legal offices with which he was familiar. Thus we find Squire Broadacres and his head keeper, Mr Sharpsite; PC Irongrip and Mr Upperton, JP ('An Egotistical "Know All"'); along with a whole cast of poachers from Mr Steelum the farmer to Timothy Tatler the local ratcatcher.¹⁹⁴ Although ultimately intended as a legal manual, to a striking degree we again have the poacher as an appealing feature of country life and the purveyor of such earthy philosophies as 'Wot's law ain't allus justice' and 'faint heart never won fat pheasant' [sic].¹⁹⁵ And if the skills displayed in poaching are here made less of, the poacher in the courtroom or the solicitor's office remains a pleasingly roguish one. As Bob Pickemup, the poacher of Deadem Green trenchantly puts it, 'the law is an hass' [sic].¹⁹⁶ A copy of the book was duly requested for the library at Sandringham.

Someone not likely to be in need of legal advice was Bob Pretty, the unbeatably cunning poacher in the series of short stories by W.W. Jacobs that regularly featured in the *Strand Magazine* in the opening decade of the twentieth century. Recounted by an aged rustic from his bench in the Cauliflower pub in the fictitious village of Claybury, these slyly humorous tales were enormously successful in their time and highly regarded by critics. The 'biggest poacher and the greatest rascal in Claybury', a village which itself was full of 'reg'lar raskels', made his first appearance in 1900 [sic].¹⁹⁷ In the words of our garrulous old narrator, Pretty was

the artfullest and worst man in this place, and that's saying a good deal ... Deep is no word for 'im. There's no way of being up to 'im ... Nobody ever see 'im do any work, real 'ard work, but the smell from his place at dinner-time was always nice, and I believe that he knew more about game than the parson hisself did [sic].¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Nicholas Everitt, *Shots From a Lawyer's Gun* (London, 1910, first publ. 1901), xii-xiii.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁹⁶ Everitt, *Shots*, xvi.

¹⁹⁷ W.W. Jacobs, 'Odd Charges', *Strand Magazine*, June 1903, 698 and see the collection *Odd Craft* (London, 1904).

¹⁹⁸ W.W. Jacobs, 'A Garden Plot', *Strand Magazine*, June 1900, 704-5 and see the collection *Light Freights* (London, 1901).

Throughout the stories in which Pretty appears, the adjective most often used to describe him is ‘artful’.¹⁹⁹ When not out poaching, Pretty’s artfulness is most to the fore when exploiting the gullibility and greed of his neighbours. When we first encounter Pretty he is in the process of winning the local flower show (and the prize of £3 attaching to it) through tricking his rivals into digging up their own gardens in the vain pursuit of a buried hoard of money. Although as a background detail Pretty’s status as the leading poacher in the neighbourhood constantly informs our understanding of him, in stories like ‘The Persecution of Bob Pretty’ poaching is also made the centrepiece of the action.

Reflecting contemporary concerns about changes to the countryside, the story begins with the death of old Squire Brown and the arrival of a new sporting landlord ‘with plenty o’ money’ called Rocket.²⁰⁰ Obsessed with rearing as many pheasants as possible, the new man is exercised at how many disappear before they can be brought to the gun. Consequently a new head-keeper called Cutts is engaged: ‘a man as was said to know more about the way of poachers than they did themselves’ [Fig. 4.9].²⁰¹



4.9 Illustration by Will Owen from ‘The Persecution of Bob Pretty’. The new keeper foolishly boasts in the Cauliflower that he will get the better of the artful poacher.

¹⁹⁹ Nicholas Everitt also made great play with the idea of the poacher as an artful dodger. See ‘The Smuggler’s Oak’ and ‘Violation of Sanctuary’ in *Told at Twilight*.

²⁰⁰ W.W. Jacobs, ‘The Persecution of Bob Pretty’, *Strand Magazine*, January 1903, 90 and see the collection *Odd Craft*.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

The story concludes with the poacher continuing to make fools of the keepers, now including Cutts, who only succeed in catching him with a sack of cabbages. When the story was adapted for screen in 1916, the role of Bob Pretty was taken by Frank Stanmore, an actor best known for his portrayal of the Artful Dodger. Reviewing the film the *Bioscope* noted how the poacher's native wit and cunning deservedly 'gets him out of all charges ... He really is an "artful dodger" in this number.'²⁰²

Stalkiness and fighting spirit

By the start of the twentieth century the rise of the 'gunners of the exterminating class' was significantly affecting the traditional belief in the martial value of game shooting.²⁰³ Contemplating the future of sport in 1906, *Baily's Magazine* was forced to concede how the growing artificiality of game-shooting was undermining its military usefulness.²⁰⁴ The view had also formed that game-preserving landowners were jeopardising national security by their unhelpful attitude towards annual army manoeuvres. In the ironically titled 'Preserving The Country', a *Punch* cartoon from 1910, a troop of cavalrymen is brought up short by a padlocked gate on which are perching a trio of plump pheasants. So thwarted, the men have nothing for it but to salute the birds, whilst their mounts perform elaborate bows.²⁰⁵ One of the severest critics of field sports in relation to military preparedness was Rudyard Kipling. Responding to the failures in South Africa, the laureate of Empire had controversially asked in 1902, 'Will the rabbit war with your foemen – the red deer horn them for hire? / Your kept cock-pheasant keep you? – he is master of many a shire'.²⁰⁶ In addition to national service and the establishment of shooting ranges, Kipling claimed that the best training for war was to be had in the kind of tough and unsentimental schooling to be found in the pages of *Stalky and Co.*

First appearing in book form in 1899, the riotous adventures of Stalky, Beetle and M'Turk were modelled on Kipling's own time at the United Services College in Devon

²⁰² *The Persecution of Bob Pretty*, dir. Frank Miller 1916. *Bioscope*, 2nd August 1917. Another Bob Pretty story, 'Odd Charges', was also made into a film by Jury. Stanmore played the lead.

²⁰³ A.E.T. Watson, quoted in Vamplew. 'Sport Without Rules', 43.

²⁰⁴ *Baily's Magazine*, May 1906, 346-48.

²⁰⁵ *Punch*, September 21st 1910.

²⁰⁶ Rudyard Kipling, 'The Islanders'. For the poem, and reactions to it, see Gilmour, *Long Recessional*, 160-64.

which, if a youthful poem is to be believed, included lawless expeditions after hares.²⁰⁷ Even if it meant breaking the rules, the most useful school experiences promoted initiative, self-sufficiency and the ability to act in a tight spot. The name *Stalky* was taken from USC slang for ‘clever, well considered and wily’, qualities that could all be linked to poaching, which itself was a familiar practice at leading public schools.²⁰⁸ If not specifically named as such, in the book’s opening story - ‘In Ambush’ - the gang are seen behaving in a distinctly poacher-like fashion. Having trespassed on the estate of Colonel Dabney, the boys succeed in getting his keeper sacked before exploring their new kingdom with the ‘stealth of Red Indians and the accuracy of burglars.’²⁰⁹ Often featuring in the ‘penny dreadful’ literature of the late-nineteenth century, stories of (public) schoolboy poaching continued to be popular in the Edwardian era and include, from 1913, Harry Jermyn’s *The Adolescence of Aubrey*. Bound for Eton and already proficient in the various arts of poaching, we first encounter Aubrey secretly reading *Stalky and Co.* as he sits through the Sunday service. Eventually expelled for peppering the backside of a keeper in Windsor Great Park, Aubrey is nevertheless treated lightly by the Head. ‘I’m fond of sport myself’ he tells the not so disgraced young poacher as he bids him farewell.²¹⁰

But as Kipling well knew, not many boys would have the benefit of *Stalky*’s upbringing. For this reason he became a warm supporter of the Scouts, an organisation he considered to be ‘the best thing for boys outside boarding schools that had ever been invented’.²¹¹ Established in 1908 by the war hero and schoolboy poacher at Charterhouse, Robert Baden Powell, one of the movement’s key tasks was to promote greater national security through countering the ‘overcivilising’ effects of life in the city and the ‘herd instinct’ it supposedly encouraged.²¹² A crucial feature of this new movement was its distinctly ruralist orientation in which a sense of tradition, sturdy independence and a proper - that is to say practical - understanding of nature were all

²⁰⁷ Charles Allen, *Kipling Sahib: India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling* (London, 2008), 102-03.

²⁰⁸ P.W. Musgrave, *From Brown to Bunter: The Life and Death of the School Story* (London, 1985), 176.

²⁰⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *Stalky and Co.* (London, 1952 first publ. 1899), 15.

²¹⁰ Harry Jermyn, *The Adolescence of Aubrey* (London, 1913), 228. Eton was well known for its poaching and between 1908 and 1910 it was reported that six boys at Eton had poached over 2000 animals between them. See J.A. Mangan and Callum McKenzie, ‘Privileged Education, Hunting and the Making of Martial Masculinity’, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25 (2008), 1107-09.

²¹¹ Quoted in Gilmour, *Long Recessional*, 238.

²¹² Tim Jeal, *Baden-Powell* (London, 1989), 417-18.

consistently stressed.²¹³ Through its encouragement of the open-air life and back-woodsmanship, the Scouts literally sought to get back to the land in a way that might readily be associated with the poacher. In the words of the 'Boy Scouts' Patrol Song' that Kipling provided in 1909, 'Look out for the birds of the air, / Look out for the beasts of the field - / They'll tell you how and where / The other side's concealed'.²¹⁴

Having filled his 1908 primer on *Scouting for Boys* with tips on field-craft, tracking and stalking, three years later Baden Powell wrote the foreword for *The Woodcraft Supplementary Reader for Schools*. Co-authored by the 'gentleman gamekeeper', Owen Jones, the book was careful to point out that 'To poach is to break the law just as much as to pick a pocket'. But equally the book contained admiring passages on the poacher's skill with dogs and snares and noted how 'The Scout has very much to learn from poachers and their ways ... and many of his dodges – though not the poaching ones! – might stand scouts in good stead'.²¹⁵ Published by Arthur Pearson (also behind Connell's 1901 book on poaching) it vividly reflects the ambivalence still attaching to the subject as its young readers are told that by 'keeping their eyes open for loafers who are poachers they may be able to do gamekeepers and farmers a very good turn.'²¹⁶ At the same, however, there is an obvious respect in the accounts of how poachers use their dogs, or cleverly exploit the distraction caused by a passing hunt to slip 'quietly and unseen into the undergrowth' of a drawn covert.²¹⁷

If skills such as the above were all potentially useful to the modern soldier, even more so was the long-standing belief in the poacher's abilities with a gun. In George Farquar's eighteenth-century comedy, *The Recruiting Officer*, a Shrewsbury JP forcibly enlists a poacher on the grounds that he would be useful against the French 'for he shoots flying to be sure'.²¹⁸ Two hundred years later the *Field* was remarking somewhat sniffily how 'Every poacher is lauded by his acquaintances as a great shot, but this is probably attributable to the fact that those who praise his skill have little opportunity of

²¹³ Sam Pryke, 'The Popularity of Nationalism in the Early British Boy Scout Movement', *Social History*, 23 (1998), 311, 316.

²¹⁴ Quoted in Hugh Brogan, *Mowgli's Sons: Kipling and Baden-Powell's Scouts* (London, 1987), 34.

²¹⁵ Owen Jones and Marcus Woodward, *The Woodcraft Supplementary Reader for Schools* (London, 1911), 82, 115.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ Peter Dixon (ed.), George Farquar, *The Recruiting Officer* (Manchester, 1986, first publ. 1706), 171.

ascertaining what good shooting really is'.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, conceded the paper, the poacher 'seldom misses his game' and the man who 'starts out at night to shoot roosting pheasants cannot be described as lacking in pluck'.²²⁰ Not surprisingly, the 1907 article on the Hampshire poacher in *C.B Fry's Magazine*, a leading voice in the campaign for improved British marksmanship, paid considerable attention to its subject's skills with his trusty old muzzle-loader – the emphasis being on how to maximise the kill whilst expending as little ammunition as possible.²²¹

Beyond his tangible skills in the field there was also the poacher's all-round fighting quality. Writing in the 1890s, Denham Jordan equated the poacher's continued presence in the English countryside to the instincts 'that in past times enabled us ... to hold our own'.²²² More specifically, Ralph Nevill's 1910 account of the 'rough and sturdy men' of the 'real old poaching spirit' recorded their value in the wars against Napoleon where they displayed 'presence of mind in imminent peril'.²²³ But for the most lyrical testament to the belief that from Crécy to Waterloo the fighting qualities of the poacher had helped win the day, we must again turn to Kipling. In the poem 'Norman and Saxon', written in 1911 to accompany a more conventional history of England for children (co-authored with the Oxford historian C.R.L. Fletcher), Kipling wrote of the natives:

They'll drink every hour of the daylight and poach every hour of the dark. / It's the sport not the rabbits they're after (we've plenty of game in the park). / Don't hang them or cut off their fingers. That's wasteful as well as unkind, / For a hard-bitten, South-country poacher makes the best man-at-arms you can find.²²⁴

'Don't sell my medals' says the dying poacher to his wife in Eden Phillpotts' bitter-sweet 1912 comedy *The Carrier Pigeon*, 'there's the VC and t'other'.²²⁵

²¹⁹ *Field*, 1st October 1904.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ Bristow Noble, 'Confessions', 150-51.

²²² Jordan, *Woodlanders*, 58.

²²³ Ralph Nevill, *Sporting Days and Sporting Ways* (London, 1910), 278.

²²⁴ 'Norman and Saxon' in C.R.L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A History of England* (Oxford, 1911), 52.

²²⁵ Eden Phillpotts, 'The Carrier Pigeon' in *Curtain Raisers* (London, 1912), 49.

The Poacher and the First World War

In one of a number of post-war surveys on the current state of game shooting it was claimed that as a result of the conflict the ‘machinery of the sport had been stopped’.²²⁶ Although ‘run down’ would have been a more accurate description, the loss of keepers and sportsmen of military age to various theatres of war, government restrictions and the rising costs of running an estate, had all taken their toll. If the return to peacetime conditions and the growing popularity of syndicate shooting produced a degree of recovery, the sport would never attain its Edwardian heights.²²⁷ On the plus side from the preserver’s point of view, the wartime contraction in the shooting of game appears to have been matched by a further decline in poaching [see Appendix 2]. Whilst fewer keepers logically meant less detection, the recorded figures reflect a genuine reduction as via enlistment or conscription a great many poachers were removed from the scene. Those who remained were reportedly faced with the prospect of heavier fines and (rabbits excluded) less game to poach. Cartridges and wire for snaring were also harder to obtain, and in February 1917 farmers were temporarily granted the power to kill the winged game found on their land. A long-standing source of grievance between farmer and landlord was thus removed, and the opportunities of the poacher reduced further.²²⁸ That deep into the war poachers could still be the subject of domestic comedy suggests a sense of tolerable margins being maintained.²²⁹ In other words, if neither poaching or the Game Laws were a particular source of concern in wartime England, the opportunity to present the poacher as an off-beat symbol of national consensus was one that was too good to miss. Now in undeniably ‘troubled times’ the poacher would make his presence felt in a way that the anti-war Connell was unlikely to have appreciated.

One of the most common wartime representations of the poacher was his readiness to enlist and thereby exchange one form of ‘sport’ for another.²³⁰ If Siegfried Sassoon saw the Germans as foxes to be hunted, the enemy could also be cast as game to be bagged.

²²⁶ *Field*, 1st February 1919.

²²⁷ Durie, ‘Game Shooting’, 441-446; Martin, ‘Transformation’, 1146-48. According to the census of 1921, gamekeeper numbers in England and Wales had been halved since 1914.

²²⁸ *Gamekeeper*, June 1916, 183, 18th April 1918, 124.

²²⁹ Bernard Gilbert, *The Ruskington Poacher* (Lincoln, 1916). Although set in Wales, it is also worth noting J.O. Francis’s popular one-act comedy *The Poacher* (1914). Telling of a poacher’s misguided attempts to reform himself, the play became a regular fixture on the English variety stage.

²³⁰ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, 20th November 1914; *Manchester Evening News*, 23rd August 1915; *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 1st December 1915.

Conceived in such terms, the gentleman sportsman and the poacher could be brought together in a common pursuit. The willingness to serve was also the subject of a number of poems and short stories that appeared in various patriotically-minded collections such as J.A. Nicklin's *And They Went to the War* (1914) and Harold Ashton's *Private Pinkerton, Millionaire* (1916).²³¹ A war correspondent for the *Daily News*, the first story in Ashton's collection details the meeting of two British snipers – one is the young owner of a Norfolk estate, the other is a man who formerly poached on it. In the act of taking out his opposite number, the sharp-shooting poacher has himself been mortally wounded. He dies in the arms of his replacement – the game-preserving Pinkerton – laughing at the irony of his fate. The stoicism of the poacher-turned-soldier was later in evidence in Lord Dunsany's short story, *The Prayer of the Men of Daleswood*. Having left the wooded seclusion of their home village in 1914, the Daleswood men are still fighting in 1918. Facing what they assume to be their annihilation in the face of a heavy German attack, and having 'no confidence in paper', the men set to recalling their days of poaching in the 'deep woods' by carving their memories on a boulder of chalk.²³² In extremis it is to the physical landscape that the poachers entrust themselves.

Another well-worked representational theme was that having joined the army the poacher proved to be an exceptionally good soldier. Here the poacher's keen senses and ability to move silently through the night were made much of. In a story that first appeared in *The Times* as 'The Poacher Scout', the Conservative MP and artillery officer, Captain Frederick Hall, told of how a poacher saved his company by disappearing into No Man's Land for three days in order to send back details of the enemy's dispositions.²³³ This story, or variants of it, appeared regularly in the press and earned the endorsement of Baden Powell.²³⁴ In a 1915 collection of patriotic verse, *Songs From a Dale in Wartime*, the son of a poaching father joins the army and quickly rises to be corporal. Using the skills learned in 'warren or wood' he creeps from his trench through 'shot and shell' to bomb the German lines. Connecting the heroic soldier's actions to a history of cussed defiance of the law, the poem ends: 'Oh! Poacher

²³¹ J.A. Nicklin, *And They Went to the War* (London, 1914); Harold Ashton, *Private Pinkerton, Millionaire* (London, 1916).

²³² Lord Dunsany 'The Prayer of the Men of Daleswood' in George Bruce (ed.), *Short Stories of the First World War* (London, 1971), 124-25.

²³³ *The Times*, 11th February 1915. An observation point in the lines at Wytschaete, near Ypres, was known as 'Poacher's Post'. My thanks to Dr Peter Chasseaud for this information.

²³⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 2nd November 1915, *Manchester Guardian*, 5th September 1916.

John had a son called John, / And a gallant John was he; / He was ready to fight with all his might, / So now he's John, V.C.'²³⁵

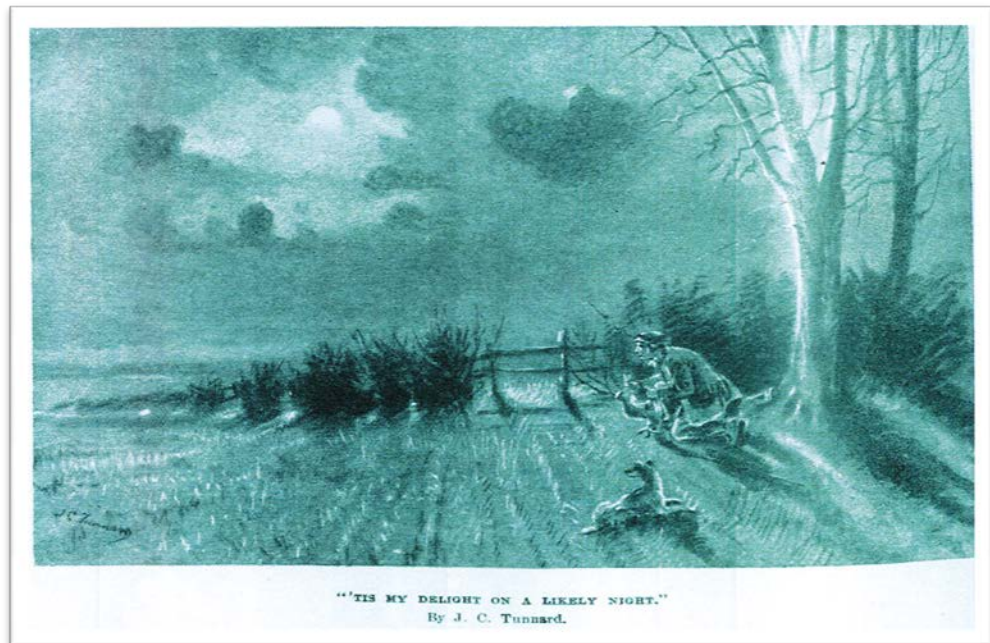
Finally, of course, there was the deep tradition and connection to the homeland that poaching so powerfully embodied and which in turn could now be mobilised. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell revealed the extent to which what was written and read at the time was informed by a sense of the English countryside. Typical of these 'Arcadian recourses' was *This England* (1915).²³⁶ Compiled by Edward Thomas, the book appeared a few months after his own enlistment into the Artist's Rifles. As with Quiller Couch's widely-read *Oxford Book of English Verse*, Thomas' collection was strongly ruralist in tone and contained extracts from the likes of Cobbett, Thomas Hardy, Jefferies and W.H. Hudson. Intended to be 'as full of English character and country as an egg is of meat', the book also contained 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'. Placed in the section on 'Vital Commoners' it accompanied extracts that dwelt on such archetypally rustic figures as yeoman, ploughmen, woodman and young squires. Also included in *The Oxford Song Book* (1916), 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' was at the centre of the *Field's* 1918 tribute to the Lincolnshire Regiment.²³⁷

Combining text and image, the *Field's* warm dedication to the 'Lads of the Lincoln Green' offered poaching as rustic picturesque. If the blasted landscape of the Western Front was extreme anti-pastoral, representations such as this were its reassuring counter. And if the war was about the defence of freedom against the naked aggression of an authoritarian state, the freedom represented by the life of the English poacher became part of the cultural resources upon which the nation could draw. At the end of the beautifully illustrated sequence, the poachers are found drinking to their success in just the sort of place that Falstaff might be imagined. [Figs. 4.10 & 4.11]. In finding both 'use' and 'delight' in the countryside, the poachers become one with the land (and the country) of their birth.

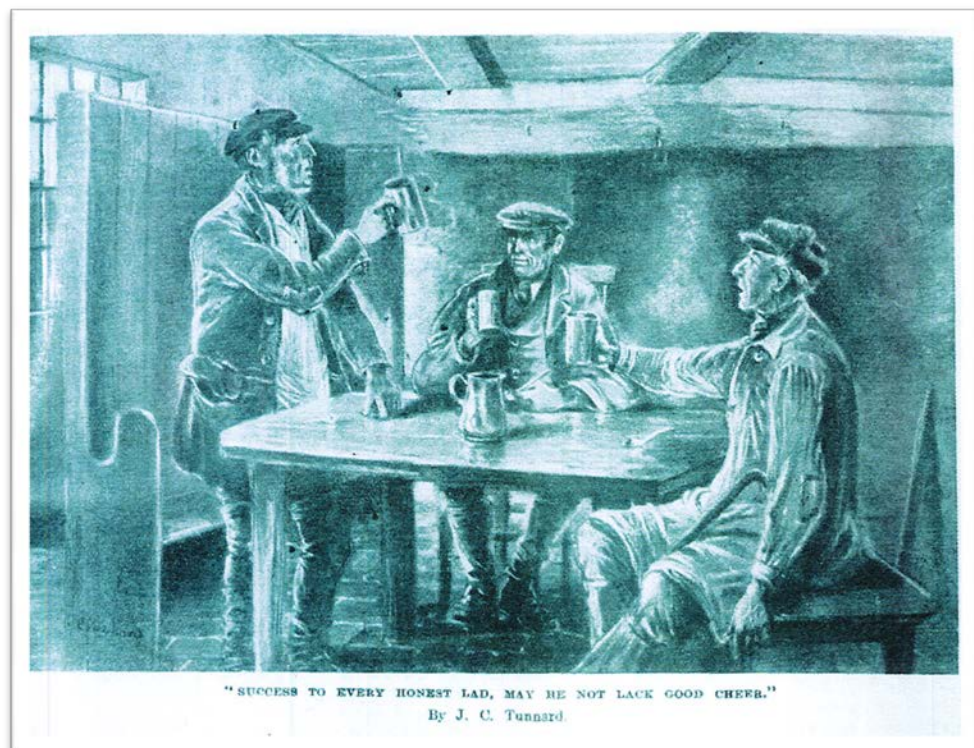
²³⁵ Henry Allsop, *Songs From a Dale in War Time* (London, 1915), 23.

²³⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1977), ch. 7.

²³⁷ *The Oxford Song Book*, collected and arranged by Percy C. Buck (Oxford, 1916), 82-83; *Field*, 18th May 1918. Towards the end of 1915 the *Musical Herald* was reporting on the popularity of the song in the trenches. 1st November 1915, 497.



4.10 From a sequence of ten illustrations by J.C. Tunnard to accompany 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'. *The Field*, 18th May 1918.



4.11 Tunnard's final picture in the sequence: a hearty toast from (and to) 'Old England'.

In one of a number of post-war discussions as to the likely development of poaching, a piece in the *Gamekeeper* lamented how the activity would never be entirely 'stamped out' and that 'the poacher, like the poor, is ever with us'. At the same time, however,

the contributor was mindful of appearing too severe as a poacher once known to him had ‘died a hero’s death and I won’t violate his memory’.²³⁸ In English fields or in the corners of foreign ones, the poacher would always be there. As indeed he would in the English imagination.

Conclusion

Reviewing Keighley Snowden’s 1926 sequel to the adventures of *King Jack*, James Milne observed how ‘every countryside loves a poacher’.²³⁹ Milne offered the comment not as an opinion but as a settled fact. Englishness was now synonymous with the countryside, and so too was the poacher. Such had become the poacher’s representational presence that female practitioners might also make an occasional appearance. In turn, these could be linked to existing associations such as military usefulness and independency.²⁴⁰ Although underlying continuities must not be lost sight of, it was in the opening two decades of the twentieth century that the idea of the poacher extended and deepened its place in the national culture. Undoubtedly this was related to continuing dislike of the Game Laws, but it was also the result of an actively positive process of cultural formation. At the heart of this was a converging set of developments that centred on Edwardian debates about the meaning and purpose of the land.

Inextricably linked to the land issue was the preservation and shooting of game, a practice which also now reached its fullest extent. Overlying this was the wider issue of the countryside and its growing role as a cultural space. An increasingly developed media and communications network further added to the idealisation of the countryside even as it served an overwhelmingly urban population. A popular sense of the English past - refracted through a variety of ideological standpoints - and deep concerns about the imperial present also raised the profile, and perceived importance, of the countryside. Rooted in the past but very much of the moment, it is testament to the representational potential of the poacher that writers as different as the Hammonds and

²³⁸ *Gamekeeper*, 20th May 1920. During the war Kipling wrote some verse imitations of Horace. One of his efforts, not published in his lifetime, was ‘On a Poacher Shot in No-Man’s Land’ (1918). See Thomas Pinney (ed.), *The Poems of Rudyard Kipling*, vol. iii (Cambridge, 2013), 2112.

²³⁹ *Graphic*, 10th July 1926. The novel was *Jack the Outlaw*.

²⁴⁰ See Edgar Jepson, ‘Priscilla’s Poaching’, *Longman’s Magazine*, February 1902, 326-39; Linnet Brown, *The Snarer* (London, 1912).

Rudyard Kipling could have found their versions of England in this ostensibly marginal figure. If the poacher was the village Don Quixote he was also the Sancho Panza, he was both for and of the people. Early in 1920 *Baily's Magazine*, a publication usually hostile to the subject, ran a lengthy article on 'The Poacher'. 'Of course the poacher is wrong', noted the author of the piece, but 'It is easy to show that there is something of the poacher-spirit left in most people ... and if he has his faults he also has his virtues.'²⁴¹

²⁴¹ T. Claye Shaw, 'The Poacher', *Baily's Magazine*, January 1920, 11, 17.

Conclusion

There are plenty of people who never poach themselves, who look on poaching and stealing with very different eyes. Popular feeling supports the law in one case and opposes it in the other. And so it always will under the present system.¹

The word 'poacher' is redolent of country life. It exudes adventure. It conjures up woods, hedgerows, stubbles, fallow land and streams, rains and frosts, winds and cold starlit nights.²

Every Englishman is at heart a poacher.³

The cultural life of the English poacher has been a long and varied one. Ending this study in 1920 is not to suggest that the poacher's representational history ceases at this point, or that it no longer holds any significance. How the poacher is represented still matters. In his scathing 2015 review of *The Last English Poachers*, the historian of Victorian high-mindedness, Simon Heffer, berated the book's publishers for giving such 'unpleasant criminals' a legitimising platform. Although no longer a recordable crime, the book appeared at a time when levels of poaching - especially the commercial poaching of salmon and deer - were reportedly on the rise.⁴ Sounding not unlike Rider Haggard over a century before, Heffer disdained the Toveys' rudimentary class politics and their attempts to present themselves as 'a cross between Robin Hood and a branch of English Heritage'.⁵ But this was writing against the grain. Enjoying critical and commercial success, in Helen Davies' view the book was both an insightful journey into the 'real English countryside' and a 'work of important social history'.⁶ By the same token, the choice of 1830 is not meant to imply that the poacher was representationally unimportant before this time. Writers and artists of the calibre and popularity of Henry Fielding, Mary Russell Mitford and George Morland were all drawn to the poacher, to say nothing of George Crabbe and John Clare.⁷ Poaching, and the representation of it, spans the centuries. Its present - as Heffer's comment suggests - is always in its past.

¹ *Saturday Review*, 7th February 1863, 172.

² Godfrey Locker Lampson, *The Country Gentleman and Other Essays* (London, 1932), 108.

³ I.J. Pitman, 'Recreation and Games' in Ernest Barker (ed.), *The Character of England* (Oxford, 1947), 454.

⁴ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, *Wildlife Crime: Third Report*, 2012, evidence, 85.

⁵ *Spectator*, 13th June 2015, 34.

⁶ *Sunday Times*, 17th May 2015. The book was subsequently issued as a paperback – albeit with the photograph of the leering Toveys removed from the front cover.

⁷ See Landry, *Invention*; Patton, *English Village*. Also, Chester Kirby, 'The Literary History of English Field Sports, 1671-1850', *Studies in British History*, xi, 1941.

While the fixing of chronological boundaries is not unproblematic, integrity for our period can certainly be claimed. Without question, in the decades between 1830 and 1920 an increasing range of cultural forms engaged with the poacher to an extent not previously seen. Furthermore, this process of engagement has fundamentally shaped all subsequent representations. That this should be so was not just a matter of taste or interest. The representational poacher of this study inhabited the kind of integrated imagined community only made possible by the advances in media technology that run thickly through these years. The local poacher - or at least the idea of one - became a national figure. The English poacher was born. The agriculturalist-turned-actor, Edward Rigby - the poacher of Bramley End who dies heroically in Ealing Studios' WWII invasion drama, *Went the Day Well?* - was literally the same man who appeared in Gertrude Robins' *Pot Luck*. Displaying true 'stalkiness' a cockney evacuee is able to get through the German lines and raise the alarm because the old poacher, part of the 'natural mosaic of village society', has taught his eager young pupil 'all the dodges'.⁸

If poacher representations were partly shaped by developing modes of cultural production and consumption, they were equally determined by the extensive social and political changes that marked the period. Conversely, however, they were also influenced by the absence of change. 'So long as the birds and the sport were there the true poacher survived and collected round him a circle of friends', noted L. Marion Springhall in her 1936 study of rural life in East Anglia.⁹ However, the 'true' poacher didn't just need the birds and the sport to survive and have value. He also needed (and still does) a particular set of laws to break. Up to the present day, the laws instituted between 1831 and 1880 have remained essentially unaltered. Throughout this time the Game Laws have been unpopular enough to help validate the idea of the poacher, but their survival has never been seriously threatened. Even at the height of the Land Campaign the Edwardian Liberal party stopped a long way short of calling for outright abolition. The decline of the Land Question as an issue of national importance in the aftermath of the First World War, the generally less extravagant and more open nature of game shooting that subsequently evolved, and the gradual (if not uncontested) yielding of access to previously restricted areas, have largely accounted for the survival

⁸ *Went the Day Well?*, dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942, Dily's Powell reviewing the film in the *Sunday Times*, 1st November 1942. In a departure from Graham Greene's original story, 'The Lieutenant Died Last' (1938), the poacher now sacrifices his life.

⁹ L. Marion Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages, 1834-1914* (London, 1936), 74.

of these laws.¹⁰ Society has changed enormously since 1831, but the Game Laws have not. Within this condition of stasis, the representational poacher has found his place. In his 1994 'Portrait of the English Poacher', John Vidal observed how his subject 'could not exist without the landowner or his agent ... the gamekeeper ... the three are as one in the countryside, mutually distrusting and depending on each other'.¹¹

Returning to the start of our period cultural engagement with the poacher was intimately bound to what was then a new system of laws. At this point representations were driven largely by the apparent rise in poaching, and the violence attending it, in the wake of the 1831 reforms. Although deep structural changes to the rural world were already under way, it nevertheless retained a social and economic importance that made the prospect of an 'unquiet' countryside of much broader concern. This was also a time when in some parts of the country cases of animal maiming and incendiarism were common. In such an environment the poacher could be shown as a dangerous threat to wider society – a self-justifying and morally duplicitous criminal on the road to even worse depredations. That a great deal of poaching was done by town-based gangs added significantly to this view. More likely, however, was that the poacher was presented as the victim of an invidious set of laws and circumstances within an overarching narrative of Game Law melodrama.

With traditional landed power coming to be questioned by a new generation of politicians and reformers, the laws surrounding game, argues Richard Price, revealed ever more clearly the 'unacceptable face of paternalism'.¹² Extensions to the Night Poaching Act in 1844, and the passage in 1862 of the Poaching Prevention Act, gave further credence to the idea of an outmoded and overbearing elite. Within this reading the 'blood on the game' was invariably the fault of those who chose to preserve it. In addition to the trans-class appeal of 'The Poacher's Widow', the extent to which these ideas were reflective of public opinion by the 1870s is well attested by the diaries of the Oxfordshire Poor Law official, George Drew:

All wild game in my opinion belongs as much to one person as another ... The aristocracy have taken all they can & are still striving to get more. They pursue every poacher with almost bloodthirsty vengeance.

¹⁰ On the decline of the Land Question see Packer, *Lloyd George*, ch. 10; F.M.L. Thompson, 'The Strange Death of the English Land Question' in Cragoe and Readman (eds), *Land Question*, ch. 14.

¹¹ *Guardian*, 14th September 1994.

¹² Price, *British Society*, 319-20.

And three years later in 1874:

A young man appeared before the Bench of Magistrates at Bicester this afternoon ... This man is gone to prison for three weeks with hard labour because he exercised a right which every man undoubtedly has, & to which natural instinct leads him, that of killing wild animals, over which there can be no proprietorship, in his native land.¹³

Comments such as the above draw attention to another important element in the formation of poacher representations – popular understandings of enclosure. Along with the persisting idea of the Norman Yoke, the recent memory (and ongoing fact) of this process generated a widely articulated discourse of dispossession. Although as recent work on John Clare's Northamptonshire has shown, there were always a 'multiplicity of enclosure stories', throughout the period of this study the dominant narrative appears to have been one of community loss and disruption.¹⁴ In this context, the creation and maintenance of a game preserve signified a double, and highly visible, enclosure of the land. Emphasising the historical importance of field sports, Richard Hoyle suggests that if they 'had an impact on the landscape and the farming which went on' they were also 'never far from the issue of power'.¹⁵ Both in actual and representational terms, the poacher became a significant presence within this particular landscape of power.

In the same decade that Drew was recording his thoughts, the writings of Richard Jefferies were fashioning a somewhat different view. While not overlooking the conflicts contained within the Game Laws, and as much on the side of the preservers of game as of those who would take it, Jefferies offered an enormously influential version of the poacher which emphasised both the skills of his chosen activity and his deep connection with nature and the outdoor life. Jefferies' poachers are resolutely not victims. To a degree not previously seen, Jefferies gave the poacher individual agency. In place of righteous anger we now have irony. Oby undermines the system that simultaneously sustains him and clearly relishes the performative aspects of his role. Writing for a largely urban and suburban audience, Jefferies' re-creation of life in the English countryside was both a symptom and cause of the developing culture of ruralism. This growing valorisation of the rural world, even at the moment it was

¹³ Pamela Horn (ed.), *Oxfordshire Village Life: The Diaries of George James Drew (1846-1928), Relieving Officer* (Sutton Courtenay, 1983), 26, 54.

¹⁴ Briony McDonagh and Stephen Daniels, 'Enclosure Stories: narratives from Northamptonshire', *Cultural Geographies*, 9 (2012), 107.

¹⁵ Hoyle, 'Field Sports' in Hoyle (ed.) *Our Hunting Fathers*, 11.

becoming economically and demographically more marginal, would have a lasting effect on how the poacher was represented.

Like much else in English society, the final two decades of the century were an important point of transition for the English poacher. Despite the Ground Game Act and the removal from political life of prominent figures like John Bright and Peter Taylor, the preservation of game and the laws surrounding it remained a source of bitter controversy. Closely tied to the re-energised debates over the land, poaching and the Game Laws were politically live subjects. Coming at around the time of the Aldbury poaching case, George Millin's famous survey for the *Daily News* on conditions in England's villages revealed considerable resentments amongst the landless. The apparent democratisation of the countryside through the passage of the Third Reform Act notwithstanding, the proliferation of 'parks, pleasure grounds and coverts' and the refusal of landlords to build cottages as 'they are only a harbourage for poachers', showed that in the closing years of the nineteenth century the 'spirit' of rural life was in fact still 'feudal'.¹⁶

By this time, however, representations of the poacher were also becoming as much about what he did, and how he did it, as about the system of laws he was caught up in. Where possible, the poacher was now presented as a rural craftsman. Criminal perhaps, but a genuine country character all the same. Coupled with technological advances in printing and image reproduction, two other factors were at work here. The first was the emergence of ruralism and the further development of the countryside as an aesthetic and ideological resource. As scholars have shown, senses of the past and of national identity were increasingly ruralised. In such a climate, to be a monopoliser of land was not only to be selfish, it also carried the taint of being unpatriotic. Within a context of what has been termed 'oppositional Englishness', the imported practice of the *battue*, and the growing visibility of 'alien' wealth in and around the sporting estate, became useful lines of attack for proponents of reform.¹⁷ But if the poacher was skilfully challenging the disputed boundaries of ownership, it was also important that he was doing it in a more contained - and less threatening - way. The second factor, therefore,

¹⁶ Liz Bellamy and Tom Williamson (eds), *Life in the Victorian Village: The Daily News Survey of 1891*, vol. i (London, 1999), 32, 241.

¹⁷ See Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge, 1998), ch. 2. Also Readman, *Land*, 61-77, ch. 6; A. Taylor, *Lords*, ch. 3.

was the recorded decline in poaching related violence, and of poaching crime in general. Along with wider improvements in law and order contingent upon the evolution of the 'police-man state', this also enabled the idea of the poacher to be incorporated more readily into the cultural mainstream.¹⁸ There would always be 'poachers and poachers', but those deemed to be of the right kind were now safe enough to be made subject of a growing range of positive representations.

From the ending of the Victorian era to the First World War, the establishment of the poacher as a fully-fledged national character was essentially completed. It is no coincidence that this occurred when debates over the ownership and usage of land, and the preservation and shooting of game, both reached their historic peaks. Criticisms of those who wasted the land and its resources on a cruel and debased form of sport were not new, but in their frequency and scope these now reached unprecedented levels. Following the disastrous war in South Africa, and with concerns over national efficiency and food supply mounting, the political struggles over the land-game nexus gained an added force. Moreover, these struggles were of as much concern to the urban population as they were to the rural. Campaigning in Battersea in 1906, and combining references to the 'immortal' Shakespeare and the freedoms 'consecrated' by King Alfred, the Lib-Lab MP, John Burns, called for 'an England that would care more about the peasant than the pheasant'.¹⁹ The notion of an unrepresentative few, enjoying the benefits of the land at the expense of the many, was given further impetus by the constitutional crisis which followed the Lords' rejection of the 1909 budget and the subsequent launching of the Land Campaign. Opening the campaign in a widely reported speech in October 1913, Lloyd George told the people of Bedford that

There is no country in Europe where so much cultivatable land is given up entirely to sport as in this country, and there is no country in the world where cultivated and even highly cultivated land is so overrun and so continuously damaged by game.²⁰

Driving his point home, the Chancellor then paralleled falling numbers of rural labourers with the still rising number of gamekeepers.²¹ Against the dramatic backdrop of 'peers versus people', the poacher could be usefully presented as a symbol of the

¹⁸ V.A.C. Gatrell, 'Crime, authority and the policeman-state' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, vol. iii (Cambridge, 1990), 243-310.

¹⁹ Quoted in Readman, *Land*, 154.

²⁰ D. Lloyd George, *The Rural Land Problem: What It Is* (London, 1913), 3-4.

²¹ For Britain as a whole the census of 1911 recorded just over 23,000 gamekeepers. By 1951 the corresponding figure was just under 4,400. See Stephen Tapper, *Game Heritage: An Ecological Review from Shooting and Gamekeeping Records* (Fordingbridge, 1992), 16-17.

popular community in its struggle for social and economic justice and greater access to the land. Tracing the idea of 'open England' and the force of its appeal to both urban and rural dwellers, John Hyde suggested in 1904 that whilst prosperity had generally grown the country had 'shrunk into a small and stifling area' where 'There is no getting away from the eternal and officious fence, with its aggravating suggestion of appropriation.'²²

However, if poaching's intimate connection to the land, and the act of trespass contained within it, gave the poacher a potentially radical edge, it also made him a sign of stability. Part of the fabric of rural life, the archetypal village Hampden could also be the bearer of ancient skills and traditions that were deeply rooted in the soil. If poaching could be legitimated as an act of reasonable protest against an unreasonable and selfish set of legal dispensations, it could also be offered as an example of a truer, and deeper, hunting instinct than that which prevailed in the age of artificial rearing and the driven shoot. It was also embedded in the history of the nation. Capturing these complexities well is the mysterious figure of 'Lob'. Just as a Sussex poacher led Kipling towards the creation of Hobden, so the Wiltshire poacher, David Uzzell, was vital to the work of Edward Thomas. Of many names and times and places Lob carries with him 'the essential history of the land'. In the guise of an old countryman Lob's key instruction to the roaming poet - who himself had been on the wrong side of gamekeepers - is simple but profound: 'Nobody can't stop 'ee. It's / A footpath, right enough.'²³

The First World War saw the end of the Land Question as a major political issue. It also led to a marked reduction in the shooting and preservation of game. While recorded levels of poaching increased from their wartime low, the longer term pattern of decline was by now well established. If highly publicised access disputes like those in the Peak District in the early 1930s meant that the politics of game never entirely disappeared, the 'silent revolution' in post-war land ownership was part of a fundamental shift in social relations in the countryside.²⁴ Although as wartime boom turned to bust, the economic health and sustainability of the countryside was again a cause for concern, its

²² Hyde, 'Open England', 148.

²³ Michael Kirkham, *The Imagination of Edward Thomas* (Cambridge, 1986), 94; 'Lob' in Edna Longley (ed.), *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Highgreen, 2008), 76. Thomas' clash with a Gloucestershire keeper in the autumn of 1914 became the subject of his poem 'Old Song'. It made heavy use of 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'.

²⁴ F.M.L. Thompson, 'Strange Death' in Cragoe and Readman (eds), *The Land Question*, 262.

role as an 'urban playspace' and site for physical and moral regeneration was firmly set. Aided by a plethora of guidebooks and improved transportation links, more people than ever went 'in search of England' and found it in the rural.²⁵ The poacher (who in representational terms had enjoyed a good war) could now settle into a number of clearly defined roles. As the following brief survey will attempt to show, in the years between 1920 and the present day, the poacher has retained a strong representational presence. Although much could be said about this, at the core level of meaning creation the essential English poacher, representing an essentially rural England, had in fact already been made.

'Here, hare, here': poacher representations, c.1920-2015

Late one evening a man walks in to a remote country pub and produces from under his worn black coat a freshly killed pheasant and a still live eel. And so we meet Jake, the mysterious, ever watchful, and possibly menacing poacher in Bruce Robinson's cult film *Withnail and I*.²⁶ In a beautiful but a harsh environment, and in sharp contrast to the hopeless attempts of the city outsiders, the poacher will always find food. As Jake's memorable appearance on screen suggests, an exploration of the ways in which the poacher has figured in English culture from the ending of the First World War through to the early years of the following century could easily stand as its own project. By the time that Roald Dahl was writing of Danny's poaching father in the mid-1970s, the author was able to mine a rich, and still forming, cultural seam that had come to include notable works by H.E. Bates, Frederick Rolfe (the King of the Norfolk Poachers), Ian Niall, James Hawker, and the real-life Lincolnshire poacher and 'Falstaff of the marshes', Kenzie Thorpe.²⁷ Growing up in the Brecklands in the late nineteenth century, Michael Home's 1944 account of his poaching father is typical of these representations:

Given an urgent cause he could become a village Hampden, and only a fierce and ironic scorn ... kept him from becoming a force in local politics. As for Breckland, he knew

²⁵ John Lowerson, 'Battles for the Countryside' in Frank Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Sussex, 1980), 258; Kumar, *National Identity*, 239-32, Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, ch. 2.

²⁶ *Withnail and I*, dir. Bruce Robinson, 1987.

²⁷ H.E Bates, *The Poacher* (London, 1935); Idem, *Through the Woods* (London, 1936); Frederick Rolfe (ed. Lilius Rider Haggard), *I Walked by Night* (London, 1935), Ian Niall, *The Poacher's Handbook* (London, 1950), Hawker, *Victorian Poacher*; Kenzie (ed. Colin Willock), *The Wild-Goose Man* (London, 1962), *Guardian*, 9th November 1962.

each hidden path and way, and in the dark he could find a track in the lonely places where few of his contemporaries had ever ventured by daylight. He knew the history of each villager for generations back, for his father had been a man like himself.²⁸

In addition to the ongoing popularity of Dahl's novel (and later film), numerous other poacher representations have circulated in the years since it first appeared. Alongside a wide range of poacher autobiographies - of which the Toveys' is simply the most recent - there have been a number of collections dealing with past poaching escapades and lore.²⁹ The books by Jefferies, Watson, Connell and 'Caractacus' have also been reissued, as have those by Rolfe, 'Kenzie' and Hawker. Indeed, the latter has become so well known that its author now has an entry in the *DNB*. Celebrating his unique skills and connection to nature, such works have also reaffirmed the poacher as a colourful example of rugged individualism and healthy dissent. This range of attractive qualities has given the poacher a surprisingly large constituency. In contrast to the unsporting ways of the 'motor poachers' (the modern *bête noirs* of the game preserver), these revenants represent an altogether more admirable practice and stand for what *The Times* once discerned as the 'true tradition of English poaching.'³⁰ It is within this traditionary context that the poacher-radicals Frederick Rolfe and James Hawker were first brought to wider attention through the pages of *Country Life* and the *Countryman*.³¹

On the one hand, therefore, the poacher could still be regarded as a radical and transgressive figure, undermining an outmoded set of laws and inverting the rules of social privilege in pursuit of a populist sense of 'proper order'. As the historian of primitive rebels, Eric Hobsbawm, once observed, 'the hunting of free wild creatures was [and is] a profoundly ideological matter'.³² Whatever its historical merits, the enduring influence of *The Village Labourer* has also been important here, as too has been the work of folk-song collectors and performers like A.L Lloyd.³³ Equally,

²⁸ Michael Home, *Autumn Fields* (London, 1946, first publ. 1944), 10-11. The Brecklands are on the border between Suffolk and Norfolk.

²⁹ In addition to the various collections edited by John Humphreys, see E.G. Walsh, *The Poacher's Companion* (London, 1983). For some specimens of modern poacher autobiographies see G. Bedson, *The Notorious Poacher: Memoirs of an Old Poacher* (Hindhead, 1981); Dennis Steadman, *There for the Taking: Confessions of a Reformed Poacher* (Kendal, 1997); Frank Cullum, *Both Sides of the Fence: The Autobiography of a Poacher Turned Gamekeeper* (Bury St Edmunds, 2005).

³⁰ *The Times*, 28th November 1958.

³¹ *Country Life*, 1st April 1933, 332-333, 8th April 1933, 359-59; *Countryman*, numbers 1-3, 1960.

³² Eric Hobsbawm, *Times Literary Supplement*, 16th July 1982, 772.

³³ A.L. Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman: An Introduction to Folksong* (London, 1944), 48-51; Idem, *Folk Song in England* (London, 1969), 240-51.

however, the poacher can be seen as representing a different kind of order, one of a paradoxically timeless but endangered world in which poaching forms an ancient rural craft. Along with the farmer, the parson, the constable and the innkeeper, the poacher is an intrinsic part of the 'countryman's England', as likely to be found in a book of rural reminiscences as in a country house murder-mystery from the Golden Age of crime writing.³⁴ From cigarette cards and beer mats, to Royal Doulton character jugs and animated films, the poacher became a ready source of visual shorthand for the deep and enduring traditions of the countryside and of England as a whole.³⁵

As the above suggests, any representational study of the poacher in the years after 1920 would need to consider further advances in media production and audience formation and the impact of having the poacher broadcast into the home. The 'interpretive community' of shared cultural exchange that Gerry Beegan sees as being constituted in the nineteenth century by the mass circulation of illustrated magazines, was significantly expanded by twentieth century developments in radio, film and television. Between its establishment as a corporation in 1927 and the outbreak of WWII, listeners to the BBC could hear numerous versions of 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', an account of Shakespeare's poaching in Stratford, readings from Richard Jefferies, and programmes like the one hosted by the prolific writer and broadcaster on the English countryside, S.P.B. Mais, in which a gamekeeper, a poacher and other inhabitants of rural Sussex talked of 'themselves, their villages, and their beautiful countryside.'³⁶ A neat demonstration of modern media technology in the service of a still expanding ruralist culture, the aim was to show how despite the growing encroachments of modern life, and the darkening skies over Europe, the old ways still persisted.

³⁴ *Times Literary Supplement*, 24th June 1939. Numerous crime novels from the 1920s and 1930s feature poachers. Carrying over from nineteenth-century melodrama they are usually unseen witnesses to the crime or are suspected themselves. Occasionally they use their skills to help solve the mystery. For a wider discussion of the use that Golden Age crime novels made of rural settings see Keith Snell, *Spirits of Community*, ch. 6.

³⁵ The film in question was *The Lincolnshire Poacher*. It was made in 1947 by W.M. Larkins Studio and the Central Office of Information at the request of the British Council for films of a 'lighter nature'. The film can be seen at the British Council Film Collection <http://film.britishcouncil.org/the-lincolnshire-poacher>.

³⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 28th October 1938, and see 12th February 1935, 24th March 1937, 18th April 1939, 14th October 1939. Listings from the *Radio Times* can also be searched via the BBC's online search engine, Genome.

When war finally came the poacher was once again mobilised as a symbol of national defiance whose unique skills and understanding of the land would prove invaluable should invasion come. Seamlessly combining ruralism with notions of the 'People's War', representations of the poacher as a member of the Home Guard proved highly popular.³⁷ In *There'll Always be an England*, the patriotic Mais would recount his own lively adventures when out on patrol with a poaching member of his platoon, whilst the regional and national press was full of amusing stories of this cussedly singular, but invaluable figure.³⁸ More at home in the woods than in the drill hall, in Edward Shanks' 1941 poem, 'Home Guard', it is the poaching veteran who fought on the Somme and at Passchendaele who now instructs the man whose game he still takes.³⁹

With the beginning of a mass television audience in the 1950s, an early success for the BBC was the comedy-drama *Nathaniel Titlark*. Co-created and played by the well-known stage and film actor, Bernard Miles, and much in the image of Eden Phillpotts' Moleskin, Titlark was the 'philosopher of the Chiltern Hills'. 'Independent' and with a 'mind of his own', Titlark also had a 'powerful dislike for work and servility.'⁴⁰ In other words the poacher remained a complex figure capable of bearing a variety of meanings. Often accused of liberal bias, it is suggestive that in the early 1970s, and again in the 1980s, moments of Conservative government and economic tightening, the BBC made programmes referencing the historic struggle between the rural poor and those who controlled the Game Laws. In the 1981 serial *Bread or Blood*, very loosely based on W.H. Hudson's *A Shepherd's Life* (1910), viewers could see how the growing prospect of starvation 'drives the God-fearing Isaac Bawcombe to poaching like his free-thinking blacksmith friend, Ben Jarvis'. The story culminates with the dispossessed labourers turning to the desperate violence of rick-burning.⁴¹ Offering something of an anti-ruralist perspective, where the beauty of the setting mocks the bleakness of the lives lived within it, the 'enchanted' aspects of the poacher's life did not escape the series' avowedly urban writer. According to Peter Ransley in the *Radio Times*, 'There are some

³⁷ P. Summerfield and C. Peniston Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007), 106-119.

³⁸ S.P.B. Mais, *There'll Always be an England* (London, 1940), ch. 14.

³⁹ Edward Shanks, 'Home Guard' in *The Night Watch for England and Other Poems* (London, 1942), 5.

⁴⁰ *Stage*, 28th March 1957; *Sunday Times*, 26th February 1956.

⁴¹ *The Exorcism*, 1972, dir. Don Taylor; *Bread or Blood*, 1981, dir. Peter Smith; *Listener*, 9th April 1981. See also the 1986 BBC documentary, *The Poacher*, which recreated the story of the executed poacher, Charles Smith. *Radio Times* 22nd November 1986.

things that a playwright just can't invent – the absolute dark of a country night, for example. You have to experience that to understand poaching.'⁴²

The idea of the poacher as an authenticating part of life in the countryside also remains a powerful one. In his recent biography of Flora Thompson, Richard Mabey has shown that when seeking a location for their adaptation of the *Lark Rise* series of books, the BBC rejected the original Oxfordshire setting on the grounds that it wouldn't fit audience notions of what the country should look like. Instead a location in Wiltshire was chosen that was 'much closer to the rural dream' with 'Rich pastures, and woods big enough for pheasants and poachers.'⁴³ For the viewing public to believe in a reconstructed late-Victorian and Edwardian countryside the poacher needs to be present. He also needs to inhabit the 'real' countryside too. Along with Mabey himself, a leading figure in the resurgence of books on the English countryside has been Roger Deakin. In his posthumously published *Wildwood* (2007), the man described in the *Observer* as the most 'inspiring propagandist' for trees since Robin Hood, was pleased to report how

In Suffolk, where I live, I have begun to coppice the wood I planted twenty years ago. It is now home to a family of foxes, deer lie up in it, and this year I was proud to discover some discreetly set rabbit snares: I had my first poachers. The wood had come of age.⁴⁴

At a time when the desire for writing on the English countryside is apparent to an extent not seen since the years either side of the First World War, the poacher continues to form an important part of our physical and mental landscape. 'The poacher remains an iconic figure' reported the *Daily Express* in 2008.

The poacher and the English imagination

Upon the death of Maurice Bowra in 1971, Isaiah Berlin observed of the Oxford classicist and Warden of Wadham that he was 'emotionally with the poachers, even when he officially crossed over to the gamekeepers.'⁴⁵ By the time that Berlin was adapting this common turn of phrase to describe his friend's career, the country he had chosen to make his home was also, in the main, 'emotionally with the poachers'.

Although we must acknowledge that the poacher has figured strongly in other cultures -

⁴² *Radio Times* 4th April, 1981.

⁴³ Richard Mabey, *Dreams of the Good Life: The Life of Flora Thompson and the Creation of Lark Rise to Candleford* (London, 2014), 3-4.

⁴⁴ *Observer*, 15th July 2007; Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (London, 2008), xi.

⁴⁵ Quoted in James Stourton, *Kenneth Clark: Life, Art and Civilisation* (London, 2016), 32.

in 1935 the *Manchester Guardian* informed its readers of a sadly defunct Danish publication, the *Poacher's Gazette*, which had gone under the slogan 'Game is for all – let the guns go bang!' - over the last two hundred years the poacher has come to occupy a more important place in English cultural life than has previously been allowed for.⁴⁶ It is also the case that this process of cultural formation was at its most significant between the reform to the Game Laws in 1831 and the ending of the First World War. During this time the poacher developed a representational presence that has carried largely unaltered into the present. In the journey from the coverts to the page, we find the poacher's true significance. Throughout this work I have been conscious of over playing the positive aspects of poacher representations. Certainly, 'Black' poachers, shifty-eyed loafers, and motorised 'poaching scum' can readily be found, but in the final analysis the positive has always weighed more heavily. Indeed, one could easily find as many negative representations of gamekeepers as one could of poachers.

Eventually declining in number, the poacher simultaneously acquired a much greater force through the development of an increasingly sophisticated mass culture that simultaneously extended his representational range and 'throw'. As with the figure of John Bull, the poacher developed a multiplicity of meanings allowing the idea of him to serve a variety of concerns and interests.⁴⁷ Rooted in the past but still of the present, the poacher could be seen as a consoling figure in the face of accelerating change, or as a continually challenging presence in its apparent absence. Of crucial importance here was that the 'essential England' became rural just as it became definitively urban. However, whilst finding the essence of Englishness in its landscape and folkways, ruralism was not simply an expression of backward-looking anti-modernism. At a time when economically, socially and demographically rural England was itself being reshaped, ruralism was as much a product of the modern as a reaction against it. Inhering to this ruralist sense of Englishness were a set of traits and behaviours - 'practical, individualistic [and] even eccentric' - that could easily accommodate the poacher.⁴⁸ Above all, there was the countryman's widely-held love of sport. Validation

⁴⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 5th August 1935. Poaching has also been culturally important in France and Germany. See Corry Cropper, 'Poaching and Regional Identity during the Third Republic', *French Forum*, 37 (2012), 65-80; Regina Schulte, *The Village in Court: Arson, Infanticide and Poaching in the Court Records of Upper Bavaria, 1848-1910* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁴⁷ Miles Taylor, 'John Bull and the Iconography of Public Opinion in England c.1712-1929', *Past & Present*, 134 (1992), 93-128.

⁴⁸ Kumar, *National Identity*, 232.

through sporting instinct became a key line of defence for the poacher. Within this dispensation the ‘unsporting’ poacher - who tended also to be not of the countryside - was rarely acceptable. As a contribution to Ernest Barker’s encyclopaedic study on *The Character of England* would later put it:

The removal and sale of game has recently been made too easy by the speed of motor transport, and the spirit of the game outraged by the supplanting of the local man as the poacher by itinerant ‘professionals’ from the towns ... Generally speaking, however, the Englishman regards the poacher as a sportsman, and generally he is a sportsman.⁴⁹

With close links to England’s most celebrated (and sporting) folk hero, as well as to her greatest writer, and at a time of widening ‘history-consciousness’, the idea and image of the poacher developed strong cultural roots.⁵⁰ In an 1892 piece on ‘England’s Ballad-Hero’, it was claimed how

Robin Hood ‘stands for *Ewig-frei*, the heart that will be at one with nature, that revolts against bricks and mortar, stocks and shares ... He is Thoreau, he is Richard Jefferies ... He is the full expression of April’s longing to get away from books and towns ... Shakespeare had him by heart.’⁵¹

Inextricably linked to the above was the poacher’s close association with England’s symbolically loaded woodlands. Providing habitat for much of the country’s game, these landscapes - even if not necessarily ancient - came to have a deep resonance of their own. In his 1939 novel, *Let the People Sing*, one of the great documenters of Englishness, J.B. Priestley, has a fictitious foreign professor comment on ‘the very deep love, a poetical love’ that the English feel for ‘the fields and the woods’.⁵² If in cultural terms the wooded areas reserved for game created ‘uniquely usable spaces’, occupying these enchanted and contested areas to a unique extent was the poacher.⁵³ By the time we reach the Edwardian era, such was the belief in the poacher’s ability to exploit these wooded environments that manuals on game preserving advised which trees *not* to plant. To keep the poacher at bay, nature had to be made as unhelpful as possible – even if it meant depriving pheasants of their favourite roosts.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Pitman, ‘Recreation’, 455.

⁵⁰ Readman, ‘Place of the Past’, 150.

⁵¹ F. Mary Wilson, ‘England’s Ballad Hero’, *Temple Bar*, July 1892, 402.

⁵² Quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army* (Manchester, 1997), 15.

⁵³ Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairytales* (London, 2012), 70.

⁵⁴ Frank Townend Barton, *Pheasants in Covert and Aviary* (London, 1912), 13-14.

Over the course of our period the poacher, of the right kind at least, became an attractive counter not just to a range of questionable laws, property relations and elite sporting practices, but to ways of inhabiting the countryside that were deemed to be not sufficiently rooted in the land, or any real understanding of it. In considering what the poacher has come to mean, it is of some importance that in the words of the popular naturalists, Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss, ‘no other nation has embraced the natural world quite as strongly as we have.’⁵⁵ Whether from Lincolnshire or any other county, the gamekeeper’s arch enemy increasingly became a kind of keeper himself – the upholder and preserver of a range of skills and values taken by a growingly urbanised society to be quintessentially English and therefore of worth. Always of the present, but with a profound connection to the past, on the wrong side of the law but forming part of the ‘lore of the land’, a quotidian but richly signifying presence, the poacher could indeed be many things.⁵⁶ Through an expanding representational field, part of the microhistory of rural life was projected on to a national canvas. Ultimately it was a modernising world of towns and cities that made the figure of the poacher one of deep and abiding interest. In the end, there was nothing in poaching except all England.

⁵⁵ Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss, *Wonderland: A Year of Britain’s Wildlife Day by Day* (London, 2017), xi.

⁵⁶ For examples of the poacher in English folklore see Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, *The Lore of the Land: A Guide to England’s Legends*, London, 2005.

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Appendix 1

Principal Laws Relating to Game and Poaching Offences c.1830-1920

1828 & 1844 Night Poaching Acts: 9 Geo. IV., c.69; 7 & 8 Vict., c. 29.	Between the first hour after sunset and the last hour before sunrise it was a summary offence to unlawfully take or destroy game or rabbits on lands, public road or path, or to enter lands at night to take or destroy game. Maximum penalty for a first offence = 3 months' hard labour. A third offence = a misdemeanour and was punishable by up to two years' penal servitude. Night poaching was an indictable offence if committed by three or more persons if at least one was armed with a gun and / or if assault with violence occurred. In these cases a penalty of between three to fourteen years penal servitude, or three years with hard labour could be imposed. Until the 1860s, transportation was applicable here.
1831 Game Act: 1 & 2 Will. IV., c. 32.	<p>It was a summary offence to take or kill game without holding an annually renewable game certificate. The penalty for the offence was a fine not exceeding £5 or three months' imprisonment with hard labour. Rabbits were not classed as game here.</p> <p>The Act also prohibited the killing or taking of game, regardless of whether a certificate was held, on Sundays or Christmas Day. The Act also re-defined close seasons for various species of game. The penalty for the former offence was a fine not exceeding £5 or three months' imprisonment with hard labour. Again, rabbits not included here. For taking or killing game outside of the designated close season the punishment was £2 or two months' imprisonment with hard labour.</p> <p>Committing trespass in pursuit of game (including rabbits) during day-time hours was a summary offence and punishable by a fine not exceeding £2 or two months' imprisonment with hard labour. If a group of five or more persons committed the above offence the punishment was a fine, levied on each individual involved, not exceeding £5 or three months' imprisonment with hard labour.</p> <p>This Act also established a system of licensing for dealers in game. Rabbits not included.</p>
1860 Game Licence Act: 23 & 24 Vict., c.90	Old licensing laws repealed. Annual licence to be purchased by anyone wishing to take or kill game (including rabbits and deer). A half yearly licence also now available. The cost of these were £3 and £2 respectively. From 1883 a 14 day licence also became available: cost £1. Only those in possession of a full licence were permitted to sell game. Failure to possess an appropriate licence brought a fine of £20.
1862 Poaching Prevention Act: 25 & 26 Vict., c. 114.	Rabbits included as game here. Police empowered to search any person in any highway, street or public place suspected of coming from land on which they may have been in unlawful search or pursuit of game. Also any person suspected of aiding or abetting, or having on their person any game unlawfully obtained, or possessing any gun, part of gun or other device used for killing or taking game. On conviction of this summary offence a fine of up to £5 was payable.
1870 Gun Licence Act: 33 & 34 Vict., c.57.	Annual licence costing 10 shillings to be purchased for any gun, including air guns. No gun to be carried beyond the confines of a dwelling house or the curtilage thereof without possession of a licence. Owners of £3 game licence exempted. £10 fine for non-possession.
1880 & 1906 Ground Game Act: 43 & 44 Vict., c.47. Ground Game (Amendment) Act 6 Edw. 7., c.21.	This Act gave tenant farmers the concurrent right with the owner of the land to take any hares or rabbits found on land they occupied. Only the occupier and one other person – subject to possession of a gun licence – was entitled to use firearms. In most cases ground game could be taken all year round, though as <i>Oke's Game Laws</i> noted in 1912: the Act was 'not framed with the object of obtaining for the occupier a modest share of sport'. The Act was modified in 1906 to extend the annual period under which ground game could be taken on moorland from 11 th December to 31 st March to 1 st September to 31 st March, inclusive.

Compiled from William Carnegie, *Practical Game Preserving* (London, 1884); Lawrence Mead, *Oke's Game Laws*, 5th Edition (London, 1912). Penalties for Game Law and poaching offences were technically cumulative: for example, a poacher could be simultaneously prosecuted for trespass in pursuit of game, being without a game licence and not having a gun licence.

Appendix 2

Table 1 *Number of Game Law Prosecutions:*

Annual Averages of Indictable Offences

Years	Three Persons Armed in pursuit of Game at Night /Night Poaching and Assaulting Gamekeepers
1881-85	98
1886-90	82
1891-95	50
1896-1900	41
1901-04	18
1905-09	29
1910-14	28
1915-19	11
1920-24	15

Compiled from *Judicial Statistics, England and Wales*, BPP, 1902 Vol. CXVII; 1908, Vol.CXXIII; 1931-2, Vol. XXVI; *Select Committee on the Game Laws*, 1872, Vol. X. The peak year for indictable poaching offences was 1843 (236).

Appendix 2

Table 2 Number of Game Law Prosecutions: Annual Averages of Non-Indictable (Summary) Offences

Years	Total	Day-time Trespass in Pursuit of Game	Night Poaching	Unlawful Possession of Game &c.	Illegal Buying and Selling of Game (1831 Game Act)	Other Offences:
1879	12,053	10,218	593	1,202	40	-
1880	10,101	8,526	503	1,056	16	-
1881-85	10,648	8,918	517	1,183	30	-
1886-90	10,087	8,296	505	1,259	27	-
1891-95	8,766	7,176	477	1,082	31	-
1896-1900	7,484	6,111	354	1,000	19	383
1901-04	7,867	6,285	353	968	27	426
1905-09	6,333	4,657	313	970	30	363
1910-14	4,646	3,247	273	750	35	341
1915-19	2,924	2,193	85	417	15	214
1920-24	4,413	3,283	182	671	20	257

Compiled from *Judicial Statistics, England and Wales*, BPP, 1902, Vol. CXVII; 1908, Vol. CXXXIII; 1920, Vol. L449; 1931-2, Vol. XXVI. [a] From 1893 the statistics also recorded an additional heading of 'Other Offences' against the Game Laws. For consistency, these have not been included until the averaged cycle beginning 1896-1900. [b] In terms of the annual judicial returns, first published in 1857, the peak year for day-time poaching offences was 1877 (12,027); the peak year for night poaching was 1857 (1,883); the peak year for offences under the 1862 Poaching Prevention Act was 1885 (1,429); and the peak year for illegal buying and selling of game was 1870 (89 offences).

Appendix 3

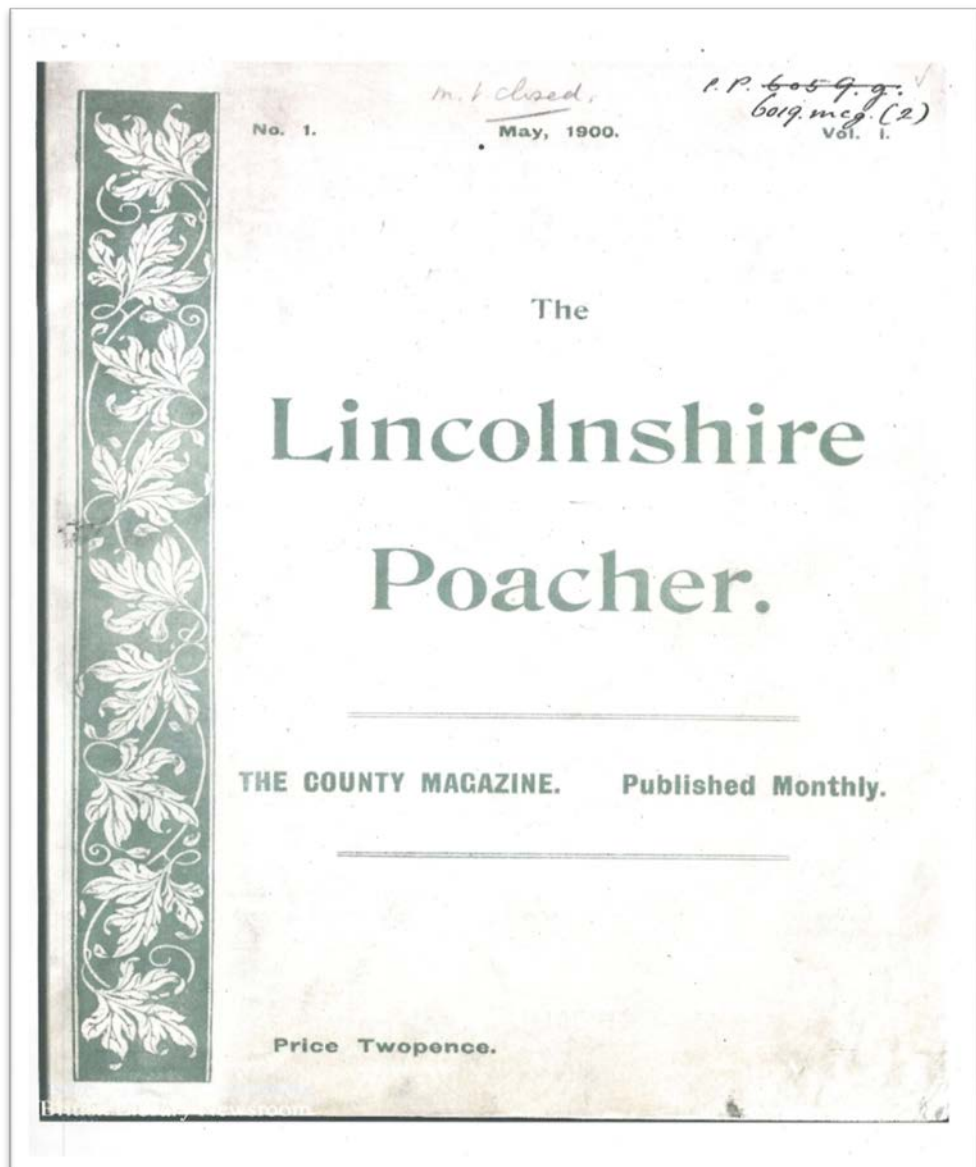
Nineteenth-century spill vase depicting the murder of Thomas Smith by Richard Collier. Unknown manufacturer.



Appendix 4

Lincolnshire and 'The Lincolnshire Poacher'.

Since the late-nineteenth century the county of Lincolnshire has made a positive connection with the most widely known of the songs about poaching. In 1881 it was officially adopted as the marching song of the Lincolnshire Regiment – a formation that in turn became known as the 'Poachers'. In 1900 it was taken as the title of the county's newly launched magazine (see below). To this day, Lincolnshire advertises itself as the 'Poacher County'.



Appendix 5

The Life-Cycle of a Poacher Ballad: *Thorneymoor Woods* / *The Nottingham Poacher* c. 1800-2010

HARDING B11(3803)

Thorney Moor WOOD.

— 0 —

IN Thorney Moor Wood in Nottinghamshire,
Three keeper's houses stood three square,
And about a mile from each other were,
Their orders were to look after the deer.
I went out with my dog one night,
The moon shone clear and the stars gave light,
Over hedges, and ditches, and rails,
With my two dogs close at my heels,
To catch a fine buck in Thorney Moor field.


The very first night we had bad luck,
One of our best dogs got stuck ;
He came to me both bloody and lame,
And sorry I was to see the same.
I searched his wound and found it light,
Some keeper has done this out of spite,
But I take this pike staff in my hand,
I will range the wood to find that man,
I will tan his hide right well if I can.

I ranged the woods and groves all night,
I ranged the woods till it proved daylight ;
The very first thing that there I found,
Was a good fat buck lying dead on the ground.
I knew my dog gave him his death wound,
My dogs they know me by my call ;
I out with my knife, I cut the buck's throat,
And you would have laughed to see limping Jack
To see how he strutted with the buck on his back,
He carried it just like a Yorkshireman's pack.

I hired a butcher to skin the game,
Likewise another to sell the same ;
The very first buck he offered for sale,
Was to a woman that sold bad ale,
And she sent us three poor lads to gaol,
But the quarter sessions were drawing nigh,
At which we were all to be tried ;
The gentlemen laughed them all to scorn,
That such an old woman should be forewarned,
She all to pieces ought to be torn.

The sessions are over and we are all clear,
The sessions are over and we all sit here ;
The very best game I ever did see,
Was a buck or deer, but a deer for me,
And Thorney Moor Wood this night I'll see.

No. 22.



THE

LOST LADY FOUND.

London :—H. P. SUCH, Machine Printer &
Publisher, 177, Union-st., Boro'

It was down in a valley a young farmer did dwell,
She lived with her uncle as all knew full well ;
'Twas down in the valleys where violets was gay,
Three gipsies betrayed her and stole her away.

Long time she'd been missing and could not be found,
Her uncle he searched the country around,
Till he came to her Trustees between hope and fear,
The Trustee made answer, she has not been here.

The Trustee spoke up with courage so bold,
I fear she has been lost for the sake of her gold,
So we'll have life for life, sir, the Trustee did say,
We shall send you to prison, and there you shall stay.

There was a young squire that loved her so,
 Ofttimes to the school-house together they did go ;
 I'm afraid she is murdered, so great is my fear,
 If I'd wings like a dove I would fly to my dear.

He travell'd thro' England, thro' France, and thro' Spain,
 Till he ventured his life on the watery main,
 And he came to a house where he lodged for a night,
 And in that same house was his own heart's delight.

When she saw him she knew him and flew to his arms,
 She told him her grief while he gazed on her charms ;
 How came you to Dublin, my dearest ? I said he,
 Three gipsies betrayed me and stole me away.

Your uncle's in England, in prison does lie,
 And for your sweet sake is condemned for to die ;
 Carry me to old England, my dearest, she cried,
 One thousand I'll give you, and will be your bride.

When she came to old England her uncle to see,
 The cart it was under the high gallows tree ;
 Oh, pardon ! oh, pardon ! oh, pardon ! I cried,
 Don't you see I'm alive, your dear life to save ?

Then straight from the gallows they led him away,
 The bells they did ring and the music did play,
 Every house in the valley with mirth did resound,
 As soon as they heard the ' Lost Lady ' was found.

© Bodleian Library

Frame: 04729 A C

Printed by H. Such, London, c.1863-1885. Harding Collection B11 (8303). Image courtesy of Bodleian Ballads Online.

A good insight into the life-cycle of a poacher-ballad, which clearly reveals their social and demographic reach, and also the way in which they can be absorbed into the cultural mainstream, is to be found with *Thorneymoor Woods*. Originating in Nottinghamshire in around 1800, it is thought to have been written after the enclosure of some common ground near the village of Thornehagh and its subsequent stocking with game.¹ Like many other poaching ballads it achieved wide circulation as a printed broadside with versions of it produced in London by the likes of J. Catnach, J. Pitts and H. Such. Versions were also issued by leading provincial printers like W. Armstrong of Liverpool, J. Harkness of Preston and Swindells of Manchester.² In the 1840s it was noted in Sussex by the pioneering collector of folk-song, the Rev. John Broadwood. In the Broadwood version - published in 1843 and reissued in *Sussex Songs: Popular Songs of Sussex* (1889) - the 'Nottinghamshire' of the opening line has become Buckinghamshire. It was also included in Robert Bell's anthology, *Ancient Poems Ballads and Songs* (1857), and in John Potter Briscoe's *Nottinghamshire Facts and Fictions* (1877). Also in 1877 it appeared in Marianne Harriet Mason's *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs*. The niece of John Broadwood, and founder member of the Folk-Song Society, Lucy Broadwood, featured it in her *English County Songs* (1893).³ As 'The Poacher's Song', it was included by Alfred Moffat and Frank Kidson in their 1901 anthology, *The Minstrelsy of England*, and it reappeared in 1909 in a revised edition of Mason's *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs*.⁴ The most celebrated member of the FSS, Cecil Sharp, collected it from a singer in Warwickshire in 1909, and from another singer in Oxfordshire in 1923.⁵ In 1928 it appeared in the second volume of the *Oxford Song Book* and in 1935 it was cited as a 'good example of a poaching song' in *English Folk-Song and Dance*, an edition which formed part of The English Heritage Series by Longmans.⁶

¹ Roy Palmer (ed.), *Everyman's Book of English Country Songs* (London, 1979), 96.

² See the ballad collections of C.H. Firth, W.N.H. Harding and J. Johnson held by the Bodleian Library at ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk

³ Rev. John Broadwood, *Old English Songs* (London, 1843); Bell (ed.), *Ancient Poems*; John Potter Briscoe (ed.), *Nottinghamshire: Facts and Fictions* (Nottingham, 1877); Marian Harriet Mason, *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs* (London, 1877); H.F. Birch Reynardson (ed.), *Sussex Songs: Popular Songs of Sussex* (London, 1889); Lucy Broadwood and J.A. Fuller Maitland (eds), *English County Songs* (London, 1893).

⁴ Alfred Moffat and Frank Kidson (eds), *The Minstrelsy of England* (London, 1901).

⁵ See the Roud Index hosted online by the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. <http://www.vwml.org/>

⁶ *The Oxford Song Book*, collected and arranged by Thomas Wood (Oxford, 1928), 18-19; Iolo Williams (ed.), *English Folk-Song and Dance* (London, 1935), 81.

Most recently appearing in *The New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (2012), ‘Thorneymoor Woods’ is also to be found in Roy Palmer’s *Everyman’s Book of English Country Songs* (1979).⁷ The same author also included the song, in this instance as ‘The Nottingham Poacher’, in his 1972 collection, *Songs of the Midlands*.⁸ Here Palmer notes that the song had been taken the previous year from the sung repertoire of George Dunn (born in Staffordshire in 1887). A.L. Lloyd’s highly influential *Folk Song in England* (1967) also has a version of the ballad as does Peter Kennedy’s *Folk Songs of Britain and Ireland* (1975).⁹ Finally, the song has recently been recorded as part of a poaching ballad ‘suite’ by the English ‘wyrd-folk’ group, The Owl Service.¹⁰ Significant here is the absence of commitment to the piece, at least in the political or musicological sense. The interest in ‘Thorneymoor Woods’ evinced by The Owl Service is based instead on a modern, intertextual, understanding of the darker side of the English Pastoral – driven as much by film and television (the band take their name from a cult television show of the 1970s) as an awareness of historic ballads or an interest in poaching.¹¹ In other words, the poacher finds his way in to modern popular culture without necessarily being sought for.

⁷ Roud and Bishop (eds), *New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*; Palmer (ed.), *Everyman’s Book*.

⁸ Roy Palmer (ed.), *Songs of the Midlands* (Wakefield, 1972).

⁹ Lloyd, *Folk Song*; Peter Kennedy (ed.), *Folk Songs of Britain and Ireland* (London, 1975).

¹⁰ The Owl Service, *The View From A Hill* (rec. 2010). A modern version of the song is also to be found on James Yorkston’s 2009 album, *Folk Songs*.

¹¹ Private communication.